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# **STEVE'S WOMAN**









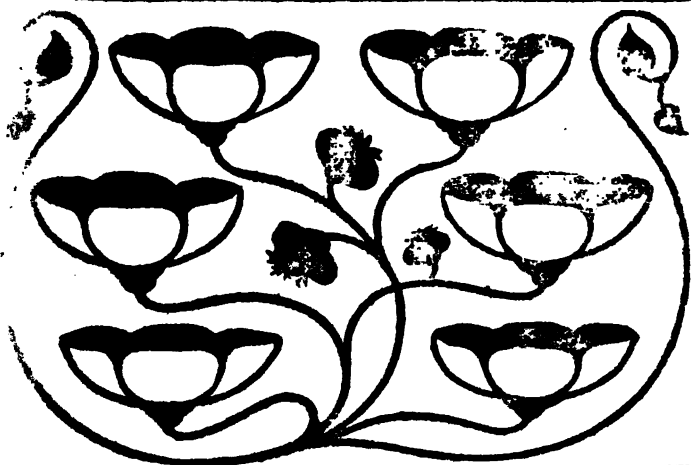
"I'VE JUST COME," SAID JANET

# STEVE'S WOMAN

MRS. HAVELOCK ELIIS

*Endpapers and Illustrations  
by Christopher Clark, R. I.*

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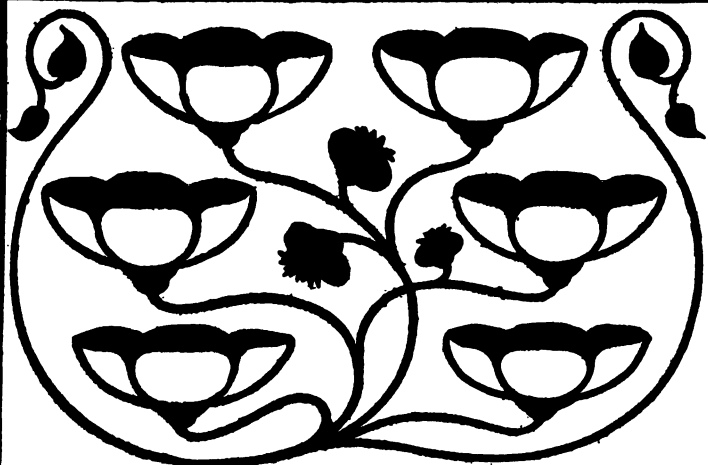


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**To**  
**ALL MY LOYAL FRIENDS**



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## CHAPTER I





# Steve's Woman

## CHAPTER I

"LORDY! Lordy! this be a weary world for the old and feeble. I sometimes wonder what us would do without a bit of scented snuff or a drop of good tea with a shake of green in it—eh, Steve, boy?"

A patient-looking man, who sat near the fire with his head lowered, raised his eyes, and grunted out, "Humph!"

The woman was his mother, who having arrived safely at her eightieth year, still kept the desire for youth so vigorous that, when she

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had a sick stomach or a touch of "the new complaint they call the flenzy," she felt that God was giving her a test for her patience which really ought not to come except to those whom the Lord loveth well enough to take to Himself. She sat month after month, crooning over the past or wailing at the future, sometimes doing a bit of knitting, but chiefly patting her wrinkled hands one over the other, as if she had a rhythmic cadence in her mind, as she sighed "Lordy, Lordy"—which name would certainly sound irreverent on the lips of any but the Elect, since it implies not only endearment, but familiarity.

"It's a weary world, my son—a weary world—and it's most more nor I can bear when I do feel I'm a burden on you and Janet."

She looked across at her son, and

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her old eyes brightened as she made one more attempt to draw the man out. She waited for a loving remonstrance, but Steve only coughed.

"It's well to be some folks, that it be," she continued. "It's lonesome for you when you be left so long, without your woman to do chars for you. She've been gone since yesterday, and even to me it do seem a month. I miss her bits o' tasties. You and me betwixt us can scarce fit up a cup of tea; for you be befoolt in your legs, and I be in the same strait in my back and arms. Lordy, Lordy, it *is* a weary business, and I hope the good Jesus will soon rid me of it all—that I do," she added with a whimper, "for I be nothing but a burden now."

Her son looked up with a faint smile on his face.

"Yes, yes, it *is* a bit dull at times,

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sure enough," he said, raising his voice in the musical interrogative peculiar to Cornwall, "but it ain't so bad for you as me, mother. I do belong to do something more nor sit over the fire like an ash cat and wait for a neighbour to drop in, so that in talking with him I can forget what sort I be now. It plagues me like a fever when I reckon it all up, and know I shan't never be no good for nothing again. But what's the use of jawing over it? I must bear it and take the best I can and stop snarling."

He stretched out his hand for a thick length of iron which lay near, and raked some stray pieces of furze and faggots together on to the smouldering fire, causing a blaze of light to spring up in the open chimney corner, illuminating both faces with sham laughter, as if the

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man and woman alike were grim jokes over which the flames might gibe. The man was partially paralysed. A mining accident had prostrated him with a disease the doctors called by a learned name, which Steve declared he could never quite roll round his tongue. Two years after his marriage this disaster had come upon him. The disease, while leaving him the use of his hands and arms, had paralysed both his legs, causing a total change in his way of life. The once muscular miner and hardy man of all trades was reduced to making and mending nets as his only means of earning a living.

Before his accident he was a good workman, much counted upon in times of difficulty or strife as a temperate and dependable sort of man who carried more wisdom in



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his little finger than most people could boast of having in their whole body. He had acquired the position of mentor in the small fishing village of Carnwyn, because of his short way of getting to the centre of a difficulty without the usual preamble, which to the rough sailors and their wives seemed indispensable before they could come near the point at issue.

It had been whispered more than once in the gossip of the village corners that Steve Trenoweth, or "Clibby Steve," had not been in foreign parts for nothing. In fact there was no saying that he had not got a tip or two from royalty in the course of his travels, for some of his ideas were quite "flash" enough for that to seem possible. Many a man and woman in the village had come in, after Steve's accident had

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disabled him, to ask for advice on some domestic matter, "just to make Clibby Steve feel hisself a man agin." He always gave advice readily, and cracked a joke as well as any of them, even against himself, so that he puzzled his old mates sorely; they could not tell whether the man was crushed or not, for he gave them no chance to pity him or to scorn him. His mother was the real trial to his good humour. He had promised many years ago that she should never leave his home, and that he would always provide for her, but now, kindness having come home to roost, with a magpie tendency to be always droning out "Lordy, Lordy!" "Deary me," he often wished, without realizing any infamy in the thought, that her "Lordy" would take her to heaven, where, he firmly believed, she would enjoy the

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perpetual youth for which she so continuously and so wailingly craved. He loved her in a long-suffering way, with a love born of habit but not of union or understanding. She was his mother, he was her only idol, and in that fact lay many of his worst griefs. She had thwarted him in his largest longings because she loved him selfishly, and wanted him exclusively, and he, in his rough way, had realised how she had strained the bond between them so tightly that nothing but habit held him to her. He was a rough sea-coast dreamer, and her snuff-taking and continual whining interrupted his fancies and his memories. The fire-light rested him and made him more a lover of his woman and the sea than ever. His mother, always sitting opposite to him by the fireside, jerked his fancies contin-

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ually to the sordid contemplation of a cripple's life, and a cripple's chances of being neglected and then forgotten.

"Steve!" Old Mother Trenoweth spoke sharply, and even shrilly this time. He raised his head once more and fixed his eyes on the wrinkled face before him. The thin, old hand with its dark blue veins attracted her son's eyes as she fumbled in her pocket for her snuff-box. It was one she prized, for Steve had picked it up some years ago when a wreck had wakened Carnwyn into hard work and new experiences; for many a home could date its miscarriages and its seizures from the day when three vessels foundered on Scryfa beach, and only six men of all the crews were saved. Steve Trenoweth remembered the day well, and as he looked at his mother he

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thought of it. That snuff-box had a tale behind it for Clibby Steve, and he just remembered he had never told his wife how he came by it.

"Steve—do you hear me?"

"Yes, mother. What do you want?"

The old woman took a big pinch of snuff and spoke slowly and a trifle cautiously, as if she were not sure how the remark would be received. Her head on one side, and her half-closed eyes, betrayed her agitation.

"Do you believe that Janet's seaweed messes do you much good, Steve? There be folks," she went on rapidly, determined to finish her sentence before he could stop her, "who do say as your woman likes a jaunt now and then, and is over fond of fetching them weeds from

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up along instead of biding always with us and doing our coddles and chars as she ought to do."

"Folks be danged!" said Steve sullenly.

"Husht, boy, husht!" she said, looking round as if the devil, for whom she had as yet found no endearing name, might be within hearing. "I canna let you use swear words like that, a Christian don't belong to use such oaths. You never did it afore"—she was going to add, "you married," but she changed it as she looked at his face—"afore you was maimed. It is a great affliction, Steve, my son, but the Lord do know best, and perhaps He 've set you on your chair there so that you could be of more spiritual use to that flash woman of yours than ever you was able to be when you did go out from morning to

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night and was in full work and pay."

She nodded her head and patted one hand over the other in a way which meant to convey to her son that she could say more if she dared.

"Out with it; what do you mean, mother? Let's hear. What have you against my woman?"

"Nothing, lad, why nothing at all. It isn't me as do talk of her. No; I always pleads for her, knowing what a power of life young things do belong to have. I've heard many an ill word of Janet, but I'm slow to mind it all; but you do know I've never thought she was the wife *you* would have took to, no, that I didn't, for—like it or not, Steve, they be right when they do say that she's a lass as is bound to make a man's heart heavy one way or another."

"Mother, husht!"

"There, there! it's always the

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way. Wives first and mothers ain't nowhere. I shall be shoved out of the door one day, and told not to put my finger in your flour sack again, like Molly Oliver was done to by her son; things is coming that way, I believe."

Steve took out his pipe, slowly filled it, lighted up, and sent a great cloud of smoke between his face and his mother's, saying sullenly:

"You believe all the lies you can fall on, I reckon. Do nobody tell you truth by chance?"

He laughed stupidly, as if he'd like to sleep if she would let him.

"Yes! Yes! and it is the truth that fears me for you. You don't believe as a big, bouncing woman like Janet is going to bide true to a——"

"Mother, husht! If I had the use



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of my legs again I'd thrash every blooming jackass as dares to take the name of my woman on his dirty mouth. Yes! I'll use words strong enough to choke the parsons and liars as come here because they haven't enough to do without taking up women's gossip. They fill your head with rubbish enough to deafen a Chinaman. I'm wild with it all—now!" and he spat angrily into the fire. "I've listened and said nothing for months, but now hear a bit of *my* mind on this job just for once't. My woman's a darned sight handsomer, straighter, and" — he laughed—"decenter than any of the maids up along or down along, a darned sight better by yards, mind that! And that's just why she's got the women folks agin her. Do you think I don't know?" He sneered and laughed roughly. "I ain't watch-

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ed and walked with maids for nuthin', mind you. I've been a hot un in my time—you do know that—and Janet warn't the first woman as I've kissed—but I guess she's the last."

He sat up and smoked hard, and his mother muttered beneath her breath:

"I shouldn't like to say as you was the last man as Janet had made free with anyway; seems to me as females nowadays has too much tether given to 'em, and by them as should have the whip-hand on 'em, too. I'm not one of they sort as believes a female can captain herself; it ain't the law of God as she should, and a sensible man soon finds that out for hisself. A woman must be captained same as a ship, or her 'll run on to rocks sure enough. That's been your blunder, my son.

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You began wrong with Janet, and let a high-spirited, lusty woman get you fast under her thumb. The courtin' should be sweet enough, but a man should feel the whip handle and flick the cord betimes, just to show the female as her lord can do something more nor worship a woman."

She clasped her hands in a resigned way and looked steadfastly at Steve, who was smiling to himself. She was not sure that he had heard her, for he said slowly, and a little absently:

"I'd weary work getting Janet. Lancashire women must be mixed up with different stuff, I reckon. It was as stiff a job as ever I tackled and made me sweat often enough, I can tell you. Howsomever, that time I was clipped tight, for I've never been able to make free with

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maids since." He snorted and smoked harder still. "I believe some times it's that that do rile 'em—that and Janet's face, which makes 'em all feel as if they'd had the pest. That's why they be all dead agin her. It's because they be crazy jealous of her. If she was a hedge maid, like lots I know here by, who go like cats creeping after dusk for toms, and ready to take men or lads, whichever comes handiest, why, they'd leave her be. But no, because she'd put her fist right in the eye of any man as tried to kiss her, and because she'd do a kind act for any maid as wanted it, they come here with their cursed whispering and sniggering, and I tell you for truth, mother, they ain't fit to wash her clothes."

"Well! well! young uns will talk, Steve, and I canna put wool in my ears."

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"No! I know that, but ye needn't wash out your ears for to listen better, and you be soft enough to harken and believe 'em——"

"No, lad, it ain't exactly as I believe 'em, but she do open the road for talk about her. I don't bear no grudge agin her, but——"

"Yes you do, the lot of ye. I know all you would like to spit out about her. You have got a grudge agin her. Say what you've a mind to. Do you think because I holds my tongue I don't know how you all hate her? Bah!"—he spat angrily on the floor and knocked the ashes from his pipe, and then rubbed the bowl of it quickly against his sleeve, as if he'd brighten other things than pipe bowls if he could do as he liked.

"Thee art a bit teasy, Steve. Thee dost want Janet to come and

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lift you onto the sofa for a while. Thee have sat there in thy chair too long and art a bit cramped. Lordy! Lordy! I wish her'd come home and fit us up a snack of supper, for I fancy a bit of tasty, and I reckon that's why we're frettin' a bit one against the other."

Steve kept up the rubbing of his pipe, and said stolidly and slowly, as if he had not heard his mother speak: "It's six year come Christmas Eve since I took her to wife, and you and old Mother Treglown have butted your two heads together ever since to try and ferret out if she be splay-footed, or has a devil's imp inside of her. Yes! you know I be speaking truth and you may 'Husht!' as long as you like. I'm going to give you for once't a bit of my mind, and you've got to listen, for I'm dead sick of all this talk

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over my woman. I've borne things till I'm real teasy at last. You hate her"—he put the pipe in his pocket and clasped his hands behind his big neck—"because she's had a bit more learning than we belong to give our maids. I know she do use her brains freely, instead of lettin' 'em addle for want of big catches to try 'em on. She can't help that. It's her nature as much as it is for one dog to follow another. Our folks takes an hour to tell a tale, and then tells everythin' but the tale in the end; and Janet tells you like the click of a door all you wants to know to once't. Same with fitting a man's meat—while one of our maids 'll be fitting up a bit o' tasty, Janet 'll have a spread fit for Bolitho himself to sit to, and it won't cost as much as a bit of heavy cake when all's said and done."

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"Yes," nodded the old dame, and she dragged herself across the room to a side cupboard to get the teapot. "Yes! it be true enough. She can fit up meat better nor anyone I do know, sure enough, and"—as she put the bread and butter on a little round table near the crippled man—"she do eat it hearty, too. I marvels sometimes how a female can eat like a great man, as she do belong to do. It do take money, I tell you, to keep her in plain victuals, not to speak of coddles which we do all like betimes."

The man laughed happily.

"That's it, mother. Hand me a drop of tea and some bread. It gives me a hungry feeling like, to think of her and her eating. When I first fell in with her I thought, that's the maid for me. Her can eat and sleep and work, and I'll lay



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my head on it her can love on the same plan. Here goes, says I, and I went for courting that woman on the same plan I'd go in for saving a ship, neck or nothin'. I'd have my man—in that job it was a woman—or go under for it. I knowed her as soon as I clapped eyes on her—with her sturdy legs and great long hands and her rosy mouth as could settle a row in a——” He snapped his fingers to indicate the time it would need for Janet to square things. “I don't wonder they hate her here. I know the sort of maid you'd got cut out and dressed for me; she do hunt hereabouts still. Yes! you know she do, like as she were mad with moonshine. No! I didna want to marry a maid as 'd sit at my feet and blink at me all day and purr at me all night like a chintzy cat. It shows what you all know

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about me, if you do think as they sort of women takes my fancy. Some more tea, mother."

Dame Trenoweth poured out the second cup of tea, and, as she gave it to him, she rubbed her trembling old hand through his thick hair and gently kissed him. Her Steve was her idol, and if she could only get him to talk she did not mind a bit of abuse.

"Eh, Steve! But you're over hard on the maids. It be true I would have liked you to wed a maiden like Wilmot Tregarth, and it's true, as you say, as she's always been over fond of you, but if you don't take to such as she—well, well, thy old mother won't make thy bed harder for you to lie on. Mothers can't count on choosing their sons' wives."

Steve handed her his cup and took out his pipe again and sucked it before filling it.

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"They sort o' women makes me sick," he muttered; "I could take my foot to 'em. The very scent of their skirts spells foolishness to me. They seems as addle-pated as gulls, and they simper and chatter enough to give you a sick stomach. But Janet——" and as he said the word you could not tell whether the blaze from the match as he lighted his pipe or the vision his brain conjured up gave the fire and strength to his deep grey eyes—"Janet, why, she's never teased me once't nor tired me neither, since we was married. She's like a squirrel; now ain't she, mother?"

The old woman nodded.

"Like a bit eel, too—eh?" he asked with a merry twinkle in his eye as he blew a smoke wreath from his uplifted mouth.

"Yes, yes, so she be."

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"And like a skylark on the Towns at daybreak, eh, mother?"

"I don't belong to see 'em now, lad," she answered cautiously, for she had a dim idea he was taking her into a maze where she would find herself entrapped in the praises of Janet.

"Well, she's like a rough colt, too—and a bit of a tiger thrown in." He laughed loudly. "That last you'll grant to her?"

"Yes! a bit like that, but not quite so bad as you've painted her."

The old dame grunted, rather bewildered at having her own weapons used in her son's hands.

"No, not quite so bad."

He chuckled.

"And down below all they things, mother, there's something else she be like, and no feller, unless he's been at a school, could get at it,

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and perhaps not then. I can't find no way of telling of it, for it's like the lighthouse lamp in a gale. I can steer by it, but I'm blest if I can whistle it into the boat with me. There, you look mad again because I've got off the tiger tack. Oh, mother! I wish you'd try and love her, for you do make her sad, many and many a time, though she says no word of it."

"Well, well, Steve. I'll try for to please you, for, as I said afore, I've nothing agin the woman, and after all she do belong to thee and I sh'd behave better; but"—with a sly glance at the man, who was now beginning to mend an old brown fishing net with a tatting spool—"I do miss the lill baby, Steve, and I do want to dandle a brat of yours on my knees afore the Lord do take me."

She pulled out of her pocket an

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old red silk handkerchief and wiped her eyes. This was her trump card, and she had saved it all these months to play against Janet. She smoothed out her apron and made a grandmother's knee, while she rocked to and fro as if hushing a child to sleep; but only "Lordy! Lordy!" was heard by Steve who never guessed that it was a lullaby. He threw down the net on the floor and the tatting spool with it.

"Now we're at it," he said, and belched out volumes of smoke from his pipe. "She be childless! That's your grudge agin her, be it? I've stopped your tongue afore now when you was going to run on that tack and now—by God! I'll stop you altogether."

He knocked some more loose furze into the smouldering heap in the grate with one hand, tightly clutch-

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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ing the iron which he held with the other, and as the flames danced round the wood he went on:

"That woman's biggest wish in this world is to have a child, mind that! Her biggest wish, I tell you. She's made in body and bone and breast for that job, better nor all our maids in Cornwall."

His eyes kindled, and the smoking ceased as he twisted himself further round in his chair to face his mother.

"I'd never guessed afore I knew her what a woman was. The maids I walked with taught me no more of women of Janet's make nor grey birds or bantams. I never shot a guess, afore I courted Janet, what a parcel of feelings could fit into a cream and white skin that looks as if her own finger nails 'd scar it. It's just them things I think on as I sit here when I can't move about as

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I belong—women and maids and mothers and childer—and I'm blest if every one of 'em don't all fit into the face of my woman."

Seeing the bewildered look in his mother's face, he said, in a more gentle voice:

"But that's not here nor yet there. Mother, do you try to follow me a bit and you're bound to come round to my way of thinking. I'd cut my hand off—yes, I'd scoop out one of my eyes as the Bible tells us to do, rather than I'd think hard or evil of Janet. There *is* no evil in her." He knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the arm of his chair as he said it, and blew vigorously down the stem.

"She's a big brave woman as clings hard to a man"—his voice was lowered, and he looked hardly at the old woman—"who never can have



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no child! There, mother!"—with a short, sharp breath—"put that in your snuff to scent it with, and strike out the sum agin Janet. You've got to put that fault to me and not to she. When the neighbours come in next and set up their cackling over maids and widders and childer and parsons, tell 'em from me that Clibby Steve can't get no child and that Janet, his woman, do cleave to him in spite of it, 'cause she loves him, mark that! and has vowed to love him till he dies—and tell 'em too, if they can spell it out, that ever since she knowed her could have no child, she's never mouthed over it—neither to me, nor to any other body. Folks don't mag except about pin pricks. I'm not blind, and I watch her, as you do know well enough, like a big fool day in and day out. I watch that

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woman of ours with childer, and it's enough to send you mazed to see the look on her face. Virgin Marys indeed!—them faces ain't none of 'em ripe enough to look like my woman." He laughed softly. "The childer know her, know her for a full, ripe woman as wants somethin' that she do belong to have and can't have noways as I can see. Watch her with beasts. It's just the same. It makes a feller feel a skunkin' hound to set fish hooks for starlings or hunt a wild thing happy in the sun. Oh, mother! do you hear me? I'm sore pressed to plead for her like this. I don't belong to be a whining ninny like I be this day, but you've set me on past my own tongue, and I don't know myself at all. No, not at all—sure enough."

His face, aglow with the energy

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with which he had spoken, grew softer. The lover had transfigured the rough miner, and educated him beyond the colleges and books he craved to know in order that he might be able to understand Janet. Old Mother Trenoweth cowered under his strange look, for Steve, her strong, quiet, and tender son, never talked to her in this feverish way, and she feared he was getting "not exactly" through sitting still all day.

"Steve, my son, don't you take on 'bout what I said. I meant no hurt to her. I'm a lone widdy," with a whimper, "and I did want to dandle a lill grandchild on my knees afore I died; but, if it is the Lord's will that you cannot be a good man to her as is your lawful wife, well, it's not for me to say one way nor another, and I didna mean to tease you, sure enough. When a woman be barren,

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you knows yourself that folks *will* talk and say that, if one chap winna do, she do often hanker after another, specially if her master bides always in the house place and she do go up along at times, as Janet do. I don't say but what seaweed can do you good, but it be far for she to go for it, and she so well set and lively in her talk, and not of this country neither."

This last sentence was delivered with a little of the old venom, for here was another sore which could not heal: that her son had not chosen a wife from his own village and people. The man laughed.

"It's no use getting teasy with thee, mother. I thank the Lord I've taken a maid from another place; I've told you over and over again, I'm none taken with these lurgy women hereabouts, giddy

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heads with no sense nor no fling in 'em. I'm going to have forty winks now, and so let's leave Janet to herself! Her 'll be back betimes and her 'll find me as mum as a gurnard if I don't take care. Don't you mind the sharp things I've said to you. I'm not exactly to-day. There's a gale o' wind brewing, I believe, and that always stirs my bile a bit, since I've had to be indoors."

With this apology he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, a bit of "play-acting" he indulged in when he wanted to escape his mother's chatter. She slowly pulled herself together and began to collect and wash up the tea-things, pondering in her old-fashioned way on the perversity of young blood.

## CHAPTER II





## CHAPTER II

Steve Trenoweth, after his complaint to his mother that he was in need of sleep, let his head drop on his breast and gradually sank into a quiet doze; but in between the waking and sleeping he thought about Janet, and wondered in a dim way what kind of power had got possession of him to have altered his life so oddly. When Janet came near him it was as if all gentle and strong influences had come with her. It always bewildered him that he never tired of her, never ceased feeling towards her as if he had but newly loved her. One of his mates had once told him that it was against



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nature for him and his sort to live always with the same woman, and he added that with his wife he had to pretend every now and then that she was not married to him, and for this purpose he took off her wedding ring and acted like a lover to her in order to stimulate his old passion for her. Steve never felt the need to lash up his old romance for Janet; it never ceased spurring him, and he dwelt in the heaven and hell of an absorption which at times seemed to threaten his reason. At first he thought Janet had bewitched him when he found that a subtler passion followed on the mere physical spell of the early days; for he had seen so many of his mates bewitched and befooled by the fortnight, or by the year, and get over it, as they did a fever. They always settled down to a good-humoured married life,

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neither drunk nor starved as far as love was concerned, and they laughed knowingly at the first love frenzy in others, which they reckoned to be the way of young boys, colts, and soldiers.

But Janet had curiously become as his actual daily bread to Trenoweth, until at times he felt he was enslaved by his absorption and no longer his own master. He was restless away from her, at rest with her, and in both cases he was often puzzled at the spell over him, which he could not analyse or withstand. His depression when she was not with him for an interval, on seeing her again was often followed by a mood of exultation, which in his homely way he compared to "the feelin' a man has when he've saved a poor devil from the sea and he finds hisself warm and happy be-

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tween white sheets again." Every morning when he wakened he thanked God she lay by his side. To feel her breathing near him soothed him to a quiet happiness which rarely grew less. She had educated him as love alone can educate. He knew little or nothing of books—nor did she; but the very scent of womanhood, which seemed to lull his baser passions as she moved near him, set him thinking about matters which had never before entered his head. He knew nothing about modern problems—how could he? His first problem had been how to fill his own stomach. His second, how to feed his mother; and before he had solved these two the third problem, which of course he never recognised as one at all, appeared to him when he was working in the mines near Barrow, in the shape of this woman, Janet

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Nelson, with whom he fell in love, and whom he wooed with a strength and tenacity of purpose which bewildered her. Being a strong, capable Lancashire lass, she had several lovers, as "wenches" always had who had any "grit" in them; but Steve Trenoweth's southern ways, which, like the modulations at the end of his sentences, charmed her native artistic sense with a feeling of grace and refinement, at last won her. She was swept away by his sincere passion for her, and the twitting of her companions, who called her "chap" a "toff," only increased the attraction towards the sober, tender, and yet passionate lover who came to her with none of the vulgar swagger or selfish bombast of the men around her, who worshipped money and money-getting more than women. Six years ago he had fought for her

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and won her. Two years after their marriage, he came back to his old Cornish home and accepted a vacant place in one of the few mines still offering regular work in Cornwall.

Almost immediately upon his return to his old associations and work, when in full health and pay, an accident paralysed him, and he felt himself at times almost like a dead man. Janet had to mother him now, sometimes almost to nurse him like a child and carry him from chair to sofa in her strong arms. The tender and protecting influence came now from the woman to the man, for her old powerful sweetheart was no longer able to guard her; he had to endure a cripple's life with its physical drawbacks. The virile lover was laid aside, and Nature, as if in revenge for her thwarted plan, had pressed the subtler spiritual laws of

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love-life into the fore-ground, and made the mental war against the physical, until the poor human, with his pipe, his net-making and his mother, presented a sorry spectacle to those who had known him as a strong, capable worker and organiser.

It was this subtle transformation in the man and the lover which made him at times unable to tell if he had more pleasure or pain in this love of his. It tormented him on the days when he watched Janet's strong young face brighten as some welcome outsider poured out news or told of some village frolic; he felt then that he was old, grey, and stupid, and she—well, she seemed to him like a seagull and a mermaid in one, meant to fly, dash, strike out and fulfil herself in ways he could not understand. He smoked the

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matter in his pipe, he said to himself sometimes, but the tobacco gave out before he could arrive at any definite consolation or conclusion. Then, as he pondered over it once more, she would come and nestle close to him and caress him in her strong womanly way, lay her long firm hands on his shoulders, and tell him what a good fellow he was, and then he felt happy, very happy,—until the devil put it into his head to argue with himself that if she had told him he was a bad lot, but that she loved him—the bad lot—better than anything else in the world, he would have been really happy and for a long time. Once as they sat together after the old dame had gone to bed she had looked at him in a strange way, and her face seemed tired and a little pale, too, and he had put his arm out, and rubbed the

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back of his hairy hand on her smooth long fingers, and lingered over the one where the ring told him he was safe. She turned round suddenly and threw her strong arm round his neck and held him so tightly that the pressure hurt him, and she said thickly:

"I wonder what I'd do without thee, lad;" and he could not answer her, for it was as if his very blood had danced in his flesh. She rarely said words like that; her northern training expressed itself more in tender action than words, and she could rarely speak when she felt deeply.

Steve hungered often for a rough Lancashire love speech, but it seldom came. He had grown very restless these last two years; he wondered if books or clever people could help him over one or two puzzles which be-



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wildered him. He was growing afraid of the silence Janet always kept, about having no child; he felt nervous about it, as he might of a ghost. Her reserve, and her joyless laughter over trivialities, which he had noticed at times, worried him, and he dared not question her for fear of putting his own dread into her mind in case his suspicions were only the result of his doting passion. The real trouble lay in the knowledge that grew upon him in some undefined way, that the woman was more than his match; that she was hiding her real self away from him.

The girls with whom he had flirted, the women familiarity had led him to understand—his mother, for instance—were not like Janet. They had no inflexions, no modulations worth speaking of; they were within the octave, as it were, and an

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occasional tuning up at Christmas, at Feast times, or when a revival took place, was all they needed to keep them both healthy and virtuous. Love had sharpened Trenoweth's wits, and he was puzzled about Janet's nature, until he had once or twice come nearly to the point of having a talk with the parson, of whom he stood in awe as more or less belonging to the "gentry," to whom a poor man could not easily pour out his human difficulties. He felt it would be a good deal easier to beg for parish relief than to ask advice on a subject he had pondered over until it had become a part of Janet in his thoughts, and would not bear talking over, any more than the big brown mole under her breast. He smoked and made his nets and cursed himself for a doubting fool when he felt an icy

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shiver run over him as he said to himself: "Her's above the likes of we—she'll find it out one day, and then—well, what then?" These reflections generally ended in his declaring with astounding emphasis that Janet belonged to him and to him alone, and he was but a poor-hearted fellow to addle his brains with silly fears.

One day, after an hour spent in thinking over these things, he had suddenly called out gruffly: "Come here, wench, and kiss your lawful man; we're spliced for good, mind, as you women say up along; you can't get out of it, Janet, my lass." Janet had pondered over this speech and wondered if Steve would ever become like Nathan Treweeke, who ordered his woman about as if she had neither soul nor body of her own, and at last gave her two black eyes

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in the endeavour to prove that man is made on purpose to master a woman, and after that to praise God and glorify Him for ever.

Steve Trenoweth had never spoken so strongly or at such length in his life as he had to his mother that afternoon, and the mental effort had exhausted him. He dozed as he thought over Janet and longed for her return. His brain and spine seemed alive and as if tiny hot insects were crawling over him, and picking with teeth like needle-points the very marrow out of his bones. His manhood and his self-control seemed to be fast ebbing away, and he felt that if he did not see Janet he should soon be "mazed." His wife had been gone a day and a night, but it seemed weeks to Steve. She left home so rarely that he thought when she had gone that he

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had some idea of what it would be like if she died, or he died,—for he could never imagine that even in heaven he could be anything but lost and “leery” without Janet.

Steve scarcely realised how his whole religion had been unconsciously modified and in some respects utterly changed through his love for this woman Janet. The world, which he once affected to look upon as a mere temporary dwelling place, had become his heaven, simply because Janet moved in it. The Golden Jerusalem, the judgment seat, and the harp and crown which had always formed, as a good Wesleyan, a background to his image of God and Christ, had imaged themselves very faintly in these latter years, and he had once, in a state of half waking and sleeping, caught himself imagining heaven

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with a woman on the Throne, crooning to little children who were playing at her feet. It was getting indeed time that Clibby Steve should consult his "leader," for Love and Religion were becoming hopelessly entangled in his simple brain. Janet being a churchwoman had got into touch with the parish treats, and this had added to the feeling against her in her mother-in-law and the gossips of the village, who looked upon their chapels as the meeting place where the worship of God was the least conspicuous part of the ritual. The newest styles in dress and manners and the silent flirtations made the Sabbath a day of rejoicing more than prayer, and Steve made up his mind that if he went to a parson about his difficulties it should not be one of his own sect.



## CHAPTER III







### CHAPTER III

"Who be there? Come in, if you please," called Mother Trenoweth, as a knock was heard at the door. "Oh! be it you, Loveday? Well, my dear, I'm real glad to see you. Sit ye down. It be so mortal dull at times here that I'm right glad to have a neighbour drop in. Sit ye down—take a chair in front o' the fire." Then, as she caught sight of her neighbour's face, she said quickly, "Why, what's wrong with you, woman?"

"What's wrong? My gosh! What's right, you might be asking! Be Janet in?" Loveday Penberthy peered round the room as she asked the question, and seeing Trenoweth

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apparently asleep, she smiled and jerked her thumb in an interrogative way over her shoulder towards the door by which she had just entered, at which gesture Mother Trenoweth shook her head, and sighed wearily: "Lordy! my dear, her bean't back yet."

"My blessed life!" ejaculated Love-day, the gossip and ne'er-do-weel of the village; "I be near faintin', that I be; I can hardly stand upright at all"—to prove which she leaned her stout person against the end of the window seat, folded her large bare arms, rested them on her capacious stomach, and let all her weight fall on one leg in her endeavour to ease both mind and body.

"Whatever be the matter, Love-day? Is Jan not so well agin?"

"Oh! brother Jan! he be right enough, and if he warn't I don't

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know as I'd fret over much about he. Lazy lump! He don't earn tuppence a week all told, and I've to go down along o' Mazes to wash and char and do coddles for him to guzzle hisself out with baccy and meat. I'll have you know, Mrs. Trenoweth, that I'm fairly done for."

"Mazes," said the old woman, "Mazes? Who be they then? But sit ye down, Loveday, sit ye down, woman and tell me all about it."

"I'm feared I shall be upsetting of Steve there."

"No, you won't; sit ye down and don't mind me; mag on a bit—it'll do the old un good. What's wrong with you, now?" asked Steve quietly from the corner, for Loveday's loud voice had brought him back to ordinary matters.

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"Why! I'm fair befoolt with them up-along folks, them as have took Maister Lander's house up by the south cove. I can't tell what be coming to pass—them strangers do seem to torment the life and soul out of we dacent folks, with their flash notions and lurgy ways and"—with a sneer—"as mean, my dear, as mean as misards, every one of them sort."

"They've sent for you then to do their chars for 'em?" asked the old woman.

"My Lord! I should just think they had."

Loveday threw up her head and sniffed the air with impatient scorn. She had taken off her flat black hat and thrown it on the floor, when she caught sight of the door which was being slowly opened from outside.

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"Here comes Nan Curtis; she'll tell you about Mazes, for she had one of 'em lodging with her once't."

Nan Curtis opened the door and peeped into the room in the familiar way neighbours have with one another. She stepped into the house place, and sat on a bench opposite Steve, with a friendly though rough greeting to him.

"How be you, old man?"

"'Bout same, Nan—thank ye."

Nan wore a white sun bonnet, which partially shaded her rough, bony face; the skin was yellow and coarse, and but for an expression of intense animation she would have been positively repellant in her ugliness. She continually exposed large yellow tusks, for she seemed to yapp like a dog as she talked; the same sound did duty for a laugh or a grunt of disapproval. She sat square

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and taut, braced up for a scold or a kind of rattlesnake gossip at any hour. She was always clean and even prim in her dress, and her shrewish tendencies and quick retorts made her respected and at the same time feared by her slow and easy-living neighbours. She and Loveday were great cronies, for they met on a common ground; both kept their native vindictiveness on the surface and both were willing at any hour to do a real service for a neighbour. Many a racy story, by which the general world is the loser, did these two women tell one another over two-pennyworth of the best gin. If ridicule and denunciation could have re-constructed a community, Loveday and Nan would have managed the whole task over one noggin of the best Plymouth. Nan sat opposite Steve, and smooth-

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ed out her clean apron over her dark green dress with her small energetic hands. Her upright, defiant attitude and her straight bust, which did not seem to offer either tenderness or forgiveness to the fallen or strayed, suggested a grim, stern humour, and a stolid common sense which contrasted strongly with Loveday's lazy slouch, ill-kempt hair and voluminous bosom, which scandal declared had more than once bidden welcome to vagrant lovers. Nan turned to Loveday, and preened herself for a tale of woe and frolic in one.

"What's that you was saying, Loveday? Be you on the Mazes' tack? Lord! You've been to char for 'em—ain't ye?"

A toss of the head was all the answer Loveday gave, but she looked fixedly at her friend for a moment,



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and then winked, at which the other yapped.

"They be parties—sure enough. How did they sarve you, then?"

"Sarve me! Why, woman—they sarved me so spicey that I can't sit down, I'm that sore." She rubbed affectionately the afflicted portion of her body, and coughed as she saw Steve smiling to himself in the corner. "My dear life! I can't even move my arm to my head, I'm that stiff; I can't think what up-along folks think we's made of—now!"—settling down into a heap in order to tell her tale with more ease. "Just listen! I goes to them Mazes fust thing in the mornin', and then it's fust one thing and then it's another, clack and clatter from daybreak to midnight. My dear"—with a loud laugh and addressing Nan—"they do belong to have

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their knives cleaned with some stuff or another every day, every blessed mornin', I tell you, and I've got to shine their blooming shoes, not once't a week, mind ye, but every day."

"Lordy, Lordy!" sang the old dame, "would you believe it, then? One 'd almost think they made a particular habit of finding mud to dirty 'em. It ain't exactly seemly, seems to me, to dirt all over your shoes every day; I shouldn't a thought gentry would act so like working folks."

"Gentry! they sort gentry? My blessed! They ain't no gentry! They do save up every crumble, and because they can hitch up a veil to their hats of Sundays they looks down on we folks as has to work for 'em. Darned upstarts! That's what they be." She beat her foot

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impatiently on the brick floor and looked envious.

"You be right there, Loveday. They sort makes their money up along and comes down along to save it on we. Well, what else had you to do?"

"Why,. it's all fetchin' and carryin' and bowin' and scrapin'—and they expects a blooming lot of mag with it, too. They's forever 'begging pardin', and wants me to do the same most all day and for nothing too. I can't make it out. If they hutch up too close to one another they smirks thisards"—imitating an inclination of the head and a slow drawl—" 'begging of your pardin!'—Lawks! look at the old un; her's doing it too," for the old woman was so keenly following Loveday's tale that she had unconsciously smirked and made a movement with

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her lips. "It's all enough to turn your stomach, and I said right out once't that I'd beg no pardins to no one for doing no wrong to 'em! I knows gentry, Clibby Steve," with a direct look at the cripple, "I know 'em well enough when I see 'em—and if I do any person a hurt I'm not so over-proud but what I'll say I'm sorry for it, that is, if I be sorry, you know"—with an apologetic smile at Nan—"but they must be real gentry if I'm to bend my pride to them, and not upstarts as can't fairly pay for a drop of milk when they've drunk it."

A loud laugh came from Nan at this point, for she knew the farm where the milk was bought, and she could back Loveday's assertion with another tale about unpaid debts.

"Yes! Yes! but what's the good

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of keep begging pardin', Loveday; what's it for at all?" asked the old woman.

"Something to do, I should reckon. I told Mrs. Maze pretty quick that I warn't going to beg pardins to no one, and that her blood and mine, I guessed, was mostly of the same colour—both on us seemingly has red blood in us and not black, leastways I ain't none inside of me—and then I up and told her if anyone was to beg pardins, it was she and not me. Yes! I did," emphatically, for there was an incredulous smile creeping over Nan's face. "I just up and said them very words to her, and why?"

Loveday drew her chair closer to the fire and crossed her legs.

"Would you believe it of the mean woman? They had a roast sent in to the dining room for themselves,

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and what do you think was put abroad on the table for me?" pointing with a fat finger to her capacious chest.

"Nay! I canna guess," said the old woman, whose eyes gleamed at this rare chance of village gossip. "What were it then?"

"Heavy cake, I should say," snarled Nan, whose experiences in the gluttony of lodgers and "up-along" people was sad.

"No, woman; it weren't even that. It were a rusty herrin' and a bit o' stale bread."

"Lordy, Lordy! did anybody ever hear the likes o' that, but I've always heard that strangers and artists be very sparey," said Mother Trenoweth.

"Divil take the bastely misards," grunted Nan. "What did you do? Did you eat it at all?"

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"Eat it?" with a fine scorn. "I just took it right under her nose when her'd comed out of the dining room, stuffed full of flesh meat, and I said to her: 'Here, missis! yer cat must be a stranger, too, I reckon! Her don't take to rusty herrin's neither—do she? Her's waiting seemly for the roast, I'm thinking.' "

Loveday clasped her hands around her crossed knee and chuckled.

"Drat ye! Did you say that for sure?" cried Nan.

"Yes! sure enough that I did, to try for to shame her. And that's not all, my girl," and Loveday clapped her hands and changed the position of her legs. She screwed up her eyes as if in pain as she did this; winked and nodded to the two women and looked across at Steve. "I can scarce move easy yet; it's the butter-making and the scrubbing

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all to once't. Think of a shilling a day for to char and rub and scrub and make butter as well. You know I can wash well enough; I've done it anyways for the last fifteen year and more—eh, Nan?"

"That you can, my dear," answered Nan, "and git the dirt out o' the clothes without any muck put in the water to rend 'em abroad as soon as they're on a body's back again. Didna your washing suit 'em neither?"

Loveday put her hands to her sides and laughed loudly.

"Oh! my Lord! I'll leave you know a thing or two. If Steve there don't like what I'm going to say, I can't help it, but somehow now I always look on you more like a woman than a man, with always be-  
ing in and listening to our mag—eh?" She looked kindly at Steve.



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"Yes! I suppose you do. I'm not harking much, Loveday, and if you don't talk too loud I can't hear you, if it's summat as belongs to women folks."

He glanced at Loveday with a look which combined repulsion and familiarity.

"Well! my dear," addressing Nan, "after I'd got through all them chars, and the butter, and washed and dried and mangled all the clothes (it took me three days' slavin' like a nigger, till I'm a mass of sores, I tell you, what do you think that pert Miss Maze had to say to it all? My blessed life! She comed into me like this if you please."

Loveday got up and mimicked fine ladydom so well that all three shouted with laughter, and Steve chuckled as he called for more tobacco.

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“ ‘Pen!’ (the cheek of she cutting my name in two like that) — ‘Pen!’ says she,” and the rough loud voice rose to a mincing treble, “ ‘you have not starched the legs o’ my drawses, and Ma and me always likes our laces starched.’ Now! what do you think of that for lustful pride?”

“My dear life!” from Nan. “You can’t mean that, sure enough!” She rocked backwards and forwards and showed her large yellow tusks with delight and amazement.

“Did you ever! Oh! my patience on us! starch in their drawses! Well! well! they be up-along notions!”

“And that ain’t all,” amicably continued Loveday, “but it’s the same with the lace on their night shifts too, and all sorts of different clothes as they do wear; it ain’t only in the legs of their drawses,

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I can tell you," with a mysterious wink at Nan.

"Lordy, Lordy! I wonder they can sleep in comfort," said the old woman, moving her neck from side to side as if she could feel the stiff laces like a halter round her throat.

"What did you say to her when she'd asked you to do such an unbeknown thing 'as that, Loveday?" queried Nan. Loveday had seated herself again and was gazing with the air of a conquering heroine into the fire.

"I said to her, 'Starch in drawses, Miss Maze?'—Eduth, her maiden name be, and after that I'd a real mind to call her that to her face. 'Yes!' says I to her—'yes! I'll put starch in your drawses, and all over 'em too!' "

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Darn ye!" from Nan. "That's one of the best you've

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ever given them sort, Loveday. They can't get to the windward of you. What did the fool say to you then?"

"Well," answered Loveday, modestly, "I'm not altogether sure she heard that last, else she didn't quite pick out what the meaning of it were, but she went to the cupboard and gave me the starch, and," with a broad grin, "she's got starch enough in her draws now as'll let her know what my body do feel like after doin' chars enough for a month for one day's pay."

"Up-along folks ain't all so near as Mazes be, Loveday, you must mind that. Do you recollect that poor devil Macnab as lodged with me last winter? I tended him like my own child. He'd no sich ways along o' him, I can tell you. He was

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as free to help you as to laugh at you, but sickly, sure enough."

Nan took the corner of her white apron and blew her nose vigorously.

"I did take to that feller, and I'm miser'ble many a time when I do think of him, poor fule."

"What's become of him since he went to foreign parts?" asked Love-day.

"My gosh! ain't I never told you? Well! well! I believe I took it pretty hard and said nothing of it for long enough. My blessed life! he be turned into a pepper-dredge, so I've heard!" She beat the ground quickly and fiercely with her foot as she continued in an injured tone:

"That's a poor enough end for a fellow to come to after all the slaving I did for him. I've rubbed that man's back, which was nothin' to

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begin with but a loose sack full of nails—and I have rubbed it till it were blistered many a time, and made him coddles enough to frighten you, to tempt his appetite. Old Nancy Nanquitho's stuff did nothing at all for him, I don't want to say nothing for to dishearten Steve there, but it seems to me that that seaweed oil is nothing but a snare to trap a fool's money."

"P'raps the oil bean't much worth for a decline, Nan," answered Steve. "It be good, I believe, for seizures and rheumatics, leastways that's what her's told Janet that it's mostly for."

Loveday winked at Nan and said surlily:

"Some folks is over fond of jawing to your woman, Steve, and they do feed her mind with untruths, I'm fearing. I don't believe myself

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in folks living in huts when there's houses near by to be had for almost nothing. If I was thee, Steve, I'd stop Janet from going too much with the likes of Nancy Nanquitho. There be folks near by as would place her character in the bottom of a beer mug and then declare you couldn't find it, drunk nor sober."

The old woman clasped her hands and turned her thumbs one over the other as she watched her son's face, but she said no word for or against the old witch doctor.

Steve laughed.

"Perhaps the woman have melted her character into the seaweed stuff and it'll come out by and by in us. My legs is better for it, that I'll swear. There be a damned sight more witches living in houses than in huts, let me tell you."

Nan and Loveday laughed at this

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sharp hit at the village women, but the old dame feared that they were getting on dangerous ground.

"You was joking, Nan, surely, wasn't ye, when you said as Maister Macnab was made into a pepper-dredge?"

"No! I wasn't joking at all! not a bit of it. Some feller wrote to one of them artists as is staying with Jane Hocking, and by all accounts he'd seen it done and wrote to tell her all about it."

"My blessed!" grunted Loveday, "it do sound like some devil's trick or another; I should have thought the police would have stopped such goings on."

"Don't you see, Loveday, my dear, they burnt him first; took him, poor feller, and put him inside of a big oven, so they do say, and fairly roasted the poor devil until—well—



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my dear life! it's awful to think on it, until he was nothing but dust and ashes like that there!"—pointing to the white ash from the burnt-out wood which lay in a heap on the red tiles of the hearth-place.

"Lordy, Lordy! it do fair make a body's flesh go crawly; it's worse than murder, seems to me," wailed Mother Trenoweth. "Yes! so it be. I lies awake at nights sometimes and thinks of him afore he went away, and I'm forced to get up and take a drop of hot ginger to soothe my stomach. The thought of that dear man being rent limb from limb with no soul by to save him makes all the wind in my stomach fly to my head. They say as after he was burnt to nothing, as you might say, they took what was left of him and poured it into a pepper-drudge. I could hardly credit it, but they as

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told me says as this sort of burying is coming over to us from foreign parts, but I don't hardly believe it."

"Well! I hope to the Lord it won't be made into law afore I'm safely under the ground. I should feel as shamed as a maid to have strange men a-fingering my corpse, I can tell you. I hope I may be orderly and becomin'ly buried when my time is over," and Loveday's big eyes looked grave and nervous at the prospect of anything but a churchyard grave.

"I do fervently hope that I may have a proper hearse and bearers," said the old woman solemnly. "Lordy! Lordy! it do give you grave thoughts upon the resurrection, neighbour, when you do think of a poor body being ground down like snuff as that poor man was done by.

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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It do fairly make my skin crawl to think of sich a thing! Lordy! Lordy! have mercy upon we!" and her old head went from side to side as she thought of her stocking stored away between the mattress and the tie in the upstairs room. This stocking was nearly full of silver coins saved from "oddments," as she called the gifts given to her by the district visitors, and also the pence she occasionally earned for sitting to stray artists. Next to the ambition to have a grandchild, came her wish to have a decent burial. She brightened many a weary day with the thought of how, thanks to her foresight about money matters, she would be carried in state to her last resting-place, amid the hushed wonder of her neighbours, in a hearse with big, black, nodding plumes. Steve Trenoweth became half un-

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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conscious of the gossip of the women; his eyes rested on the well-known line of coast which he could plainly see through the window from his seat in the chimney corner. Since his illness the colour and life of the fishing village had been his chief amusement; he could watch the herring and mackerel boats come in, and as he heard the clang of the bell of the seller he knew exactly what chaffing and bartering was going on, and guessed by the gestures of the men the state of the market on the various days when big catches were brought in. Just now he vaguely heard Nan describing how she had put green oil on her lodger's throat, how three doctor's "prints" had been administered to him at once and all had failed to save him, and the voices seemed far away, like echoes from a distant hill. He was gazing in-

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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tently at a young sailor on the beach who was throwing up a big ball, while grouped round him were the lasses and lads of the fishing village alternately jeering and cheering him. His lithe body and quick movements riveted the crippled man, whose muscles tightened with each successful catch of the ball. The sun was setting behind a large black rock; the water rippled and shimmered in a blue listlessness as sky and sea mingled into one colour. The rough slouching figures of the idling fishermen, who leaned against the posts and sea-wall smoking and chaffing, became transfigured in the golden tints of the sunset, while they woke into a romantic beauty and freshness the loose-throated bronzed and stalwart youngsters who had come out to do a bit of courting and idling before the night set in. Steve

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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watched the colours redden and deepen, and was soothed at the scene before him. The wavelets crept almost noiselessly on the beach and seemed to lilt a love-song to him. The village gossip near him grew faint, and he felt that the world after all was a fresh flower-filled valley where a man could rest himself and love his fill. The swish-swash of the sea, and the laughing voices of the men and maids, gradually drove away his irritable mood, and he smiled happily as his eyes rested on the setting sun, and noted how the light sparkled on the oars of a few fisher boats idling in the bay. The brown sails of one or two mackerel skiffs gave a sombre touch to the blue fairyland before him. Suddenly his fingers clutched the stem of his pipe; round by the harbour he had tracked the slow,

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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swinging walk of a woman, and he leaned back in his chair and hummed softly.

## CHAPTER IV







## CHAPTER IV

"Here! My blessed life! Steve! waken up, man! I've just spied thy woman along the quay," said Loveday, sharply. Then, in an aside to Mother Trenoweth: "And time enough, too, I should say; seems to me as we don't know all as goes on over them weeds. I believe it's mostly a passil of cunning, and that physic ain't none in it at all, no!" with a twist of the lips and a rough laugh. "I've heered a sight of things I shouldn't care to speak on of Janet's ways with strangers, I can tell you."

"Darn you!" interrupted Nan. "Leave the woman be; devil take ye, Loveday! if her's wrong, well,

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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her's wrong and her fault'll track her sure enough. It fair turns my blood to cabbage water to always hear the unfavourablest side to a woman's name. Leave her be, I say, and don't make strife in another body's house," with a side look at Steve, who was quite unconscious of what they were saying. Mother Trenoweth shook her head wearily.

"Lordy! Lordy! I always feel myself as if a power of trouble was a-coming on this house. I do say many and many a time that it be poor luck for a man to take a wife from up-along strangers who don't worship nor yet to live as we do hereabouts." Then in a lower tone she said to Loveday, after glancing at the unconscious face of her son:

"Hark you, woman! I do wonder what you have heard about Janet;

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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do you come in the day fur a cup of tea, and while I be fitting of it up you can tell me all about it, for I do hate Steve's wife to be spoken evil of and no one by to defend her." Her cunning old eyes glanced sideways at Loveday, who laughed outright.

"I do believe myself as her is nothing short of a bad 'un, and there's more nor one as 'll bear that out, sure enough. Well, my blessed! how long have you been standing there, Mrs. Trenoweth?" as her eyes rested on the open door where Janet stood. All three women started guiltily and smiled in a constrained way as they looked round quickly at Steve, who was wide awake now. "I've just come," said Janet.

She moved into the middle of the kitchen, and as she stood between

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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the door and the window the last rays of the setting sun lit up her strong face and tall figure and seemed to throw the other women into shadow. Her loose simple gown of blue linen, such as is worn by fisher folk, was caught at the waist by a twisted band of dark red sateen, which threw into relief her well-developed breasts and sloping hips. The muscles of her arms could be clearly traced below the short bodice sleeves, which were somewhat shrunken with constant washings. She turned her large dark blue eyes upon the little group before her and smiled easily and pleasantly at the three women.

She was evidently quite unconscious that their talk had been about her, and asked kindly in her deep voice:

“And how are you, mother? And

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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Steve?" and her eyes met her husband's gaze and then fell as he smiled at her.

The two women got up immediately and said good-bye amid the head-shaking of the old woman. When the door was shut behind Nan and Loveday, whose chatter could be heard above the clatter of their shoes down the village street, Mother Trenoweth hobbled off to her bedroom muttering:

"Lordy! Lordy!" adding in an awe-struck whisper, "The devil's in it, I believe. Janet a—oh! Loveday can't mean that, sure enough, but I'll find out, yes, I'll find out, and if the beauty should turn out to be only a giddy head after all, it's no more nor can be expected from up-along folks."

She banged the door of her room and sat down in her chair by her

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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bed, put on her glasses and, sighing deeply, drew her old Bible towards her, and read her usual evening chapter. After this was finished, a feeling of inward peace and satisfaction stole over her, irradiating her old sallow face, for she realised now that the Almighty had indeed laid a mission upon her shoulders, the mission of sifting to the dregs the unknown nature and ways of her daughter-in-law, Janet. She rocked herself to and fro and felt the exaltation of a religious fervour stealing over her; it gradually aroused hunger in her, and she hoped that husband and wife would soon call her to eat some of Janet's "coddles."

Husband and wife, however, were evidently in no hurry to summon her, and she had plenty of time to digest, not only the scriptures, but the village gossip of the afternoon.

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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When Janet was left alone with Steve she had gone quickly over to him and taken him up in her arms as if he had been a child and laid him on his couch. She leaned over him and put her soft warm hands on each side of his head as she kissed his eyes.

"Poor old man!" she murmured. "How tired you must be! Here! let me shake your pillows, so!"

He grasped her hands tightly in his and then passionately kissed them, laying them one over the other. She moved away a little nervously as she glanced at his feverish eyes, as if she dreaded his next movement. Then, almost impulsively, she turned back to him again a moment afterwards and said:

"I've brought your oil, Steve."

He looked at her, glad of the chance to do so.



## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"How long will it last this time?"

"A week; and then," stammering, "I'm to go for a larger bottle which will last a month or so."

She turned her back to him and raked the fire.

"Had a good time?"

"Yes: and you?"

"I've had those cackling women at my elbows, I believe, all the day long," with an impatient shrug. "For heaven's sake, keep that lot out now. It's time I was dead and buried, I'm thinking, to be left alone with a passil o' petticoats who mag their tongues out and my ears off; don't you think so?"

He looked eagerly at her and saw her large brown hands clenched as she looked at him.

"Don't say that," she muttered, in her low voice, and a quick red

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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glow seemed to shiver for a moment over her face. He noticed it.

"You're warm with lifting me, lass. We'd better get Sandy Dick to come in at night-fall to save you; don't you think?"

"No; you mustn't do that. I like to lift you—you know that, lad."

He smiled.

"I'd give near all the rest of the life left to me if I could lift thee now, lass; yes, now, this minute, clean and straight in my arms. I'd run with thee round the room, catch thee close and fast and hard to my heart and smother thee close and warm with all the love in me for thee. I wouldn't let you stir no more nor a starling in a trap. I'd make thy cheeks burn with another sort of colour. By God! Janet! I'm near choked with it all! It's worse nor

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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hunger or thirst woman, that it be, this love I have for thee."

She stood before him, trembling, her long, brown hands hanging by her sides. Her eyes were lowered, and once or twice she seemed to be going to speak, but the words never came. At last she moved her hands, clasping them in front of her, and Steve's eyes followed the action. He had often wondered why her hands had such power over him; they often thrilled his pulses more than her face or her tall lithe body. He looked at them now, and a great love-storm seemed to shake him.

"Come."

He held out his arms.

She stood still and said brokenly:

"I want to talk quietly to you, Steve, lad! Something strange has happened me an' it's to thee I want to tell it."

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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He seemed not to hear; his eyes were fixed on her strong, keen face; he looked like a thirsty man who has found a well of water after hours of wandering; he laughed at last, a low, happy, cooing laugh. "Thou art a beauty, Janet; it gives me a summer's day feeling to look at you, sure enough. God Almighty chuckled away the mould lass, after He'd made thee. I reckon He'd grudge throwing thy sort out by the gross."

He folded his arms across his breast and eyed her hungrily.

"From head to heel there ain't a flaw in thee, not one."

She blushed hotly, and he laughed again. "That's it. That's like the old days when I were so hot, and you were so scared; do thee mind them days? Hang it all! You're the only maid as have ever mazed me; do thee mind how I used to get so

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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crazed over your white flesh that thee thought I was not exactly more nor once't. Come!"

She came and sat on a low stool near him.

"Do thee mind how one night I was so crazed with joy and love that I knelt down and prayed like a parson? Do thee mind how the words came pouring out thinking of Him as had made women and made 'em so different to we, do thee mind? and how at last thee pulled me by the sleeve and tried to cool me down, for thee said I were blaspheming!" He laughed gaily now. "Well! sweetheart! I've felt different over women folks ever since then; there's a darned lot of miracle work, strikes me, going on in women as perhaps God Hissself scarcely reckoned on when He started 'em." He was mechanically

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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twisting and untwisting the button of her dress bodice. She took his hand once as if to hold it in hers, but he clasped her hands together and went on playing with her gown.

"I must seem a poor creature to thee now, Janet," he went on; "it do fret me near to mazziness, in these June days when the sun's so warm and the birds sing. I'm no good to thee. Damn it all! Nothing but a bit of man wreck. Best do with me what government made we do with the big stranded vessels on the shore; blow 'em up with dynamite to make room for other things."

"Thou has been too long alone, lad," she muttered, and her eyes wandered to his shrunken, crippled legs. "I'll soon set thee right again. Thou knows," with a quick jerk of her head, "that I shall never do aught but love thee."

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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She blushed and moved quickly towards the hearth and put a saucepan of water on the fire for making him a "coddle" before he went to bed. As she knelt on the hearthstone with one knee bent under her, Steve's eyes rested on her bare neck and bent head. A soft dark down was traceable below the mark where her hair stopped growing, and added to the curves of her throat and neck. Just now the droop of her head seemed to madden Steve. Her absence and his nervous irritability after the scene with his mother had told upon him. He rose up on his couch, his eyes sparkling and his hands twitching.

"Come here, wench."

She turned quickly and walked over to him with an inquiring look on her face.







“COME JANET!”

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"Come here!" he repeated, and he glanced towards the door through which his mother had gone.

"Lock that! let's have five minutes free from spies."

She slowly did his bidding and came back with a puzzled look on her face, and then knelt down by him and stroked his hand, which was twitching nervously.

"Come, Janet!"

His voice grew hoarse and passionate.

"Janet!" he cried as he pulled her face down to him, fiercely gathered her head on his breast and buried his hand beneath the hair above her neck. He stroked her cheek and ear and then pressed his hand once more on the warm neck, as if he would never let her go. He breathed heavily:

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"I'm a blasted fool, my girl, but I'm mazed with love of thee. Quick! put thy arms tight round me, tight, and tell me," and he pushed back her head and looked into her eyes—"tell me, woman, that in spite of old woman's mag and my smashed limbs you do love me," with his teeth set, "love me as a woman loves a man."

Janet simply looked into his hungry face, gathered him to her, as a woman would a child, and said in a low, quiet voice:

"Thou knows that I love thee, Steve—as—as"—she hesitated—"as a limb of my own body."

He lay back calmed for a few moments, and then he said wearily:

"It's a child. That's it. Devil take it all. Give me my pipe or I shall do and say more in a minute nor I can make amends for in a year."

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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She went over to his chair by the fireside, got his pipe and took it from its shelf very slowly and deliberately. She turned once more towards her husband. Her face had grown grey and hard, and her firm lips quivered slightly. The finely cut nostrils were dilated and the dark blue eyes had grown larger and brighter. As she met the full gaze of Steve's eyes she advanced rapidly towards him and threw the pipe on the couch by his side.

"Steve!"

His name was uttered with such bitterness that he started and looked full at her once more.

"Steve! don't let me hear thee speak of that again. Do you mind what I say? Never! There's some things I'd dare the angels to talk over to me, and that's one."

"Why?" he muttered.

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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She stared at him, and a look of repulsion mingled with the pain in her face.

"Because," she answered quickly, "because it do never do to think of some things, that's why. It's best to throw them in the back of your head and forget they're there, and there let 'em wait till the day when reckonings are made up."

She turned aside and shrugged her broad shoulders. Steve watched her closely as she went over to the fire and stirred her "coddle." He had lighted his pipe and was smoking hard. He watched her put the things on the table for their evening meal, and he did not attempt to speak to her. At last he saw her lean her hands on the table and, looking at him again with the same worn hard look, she said:

"I hate a coward, always did,

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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either among wenches or lads, and when I do think of that," with a gesture, "I'm a poor, weak woman who's not fit to work nor do for others."

The man sighed.

Janet turned her back on him and took from the fire the boiling pot, washed her hands quickly at the sink, and as she wiped them she again came over to Trenoweth and said to him, in a weary, patient voice: "Don't think I feel hardly against thee, lad," she said gently. "Men's made all different to women, I believe; a woman would guess my meaning at once. Men's more like dogs, I reckon. Very knowing and all that, but women's souls more nor their bodies wants to breed."

He looked puzzled, and she laughed as she kissed him once more on his eyes.

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"Never mind, old man; I've been dumpy to-day, but I'm tired with the journey and seeing"—she hesitated—"new things. It's better to bide to home with thee, and then I don't get moithered," she said, falling into her native Lancashire tongue. "Here! let me rub your legs and then you can have your bit of supper and be comfie again. I be only making things worse for you now, and there's lots I want to tell you after you're rested."

She forced herself to be gay, and he gradually fell into her mood and calmed down into playful tenderness, forgetting his doubts and misgivings in the enjoyment of being ministered to by this wife of his who had given him new life and strength already. His doubts, however, were only lulled for the moment, for his last intelligible thought as he fell

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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asleep that night was that women folks being such "tetchy and unknown creatures," it would be just as well, if the chance came, to see what the parson had to say about many things which addled his poor brains so continuously that he could get no peace nor sleep for the thoughts which came to him.





## CHAPTER V





## CHAPTER V

As if fate willed it, Parson Trownson called during the following week at Steve Trenoweth's house. Janet occasionally attended his church, and as he had a village children's treat coming on, he dropped in, on his way to a sick parishioner, to ask Mrs. Trenoweth to help him with one of the tea-tables. Steve not being a churchman, he had seen little of him at any time, and when he entered the kitchen, as no answer came to his knock, he was surprised to find Steve alone and helpless, as he had never realised from Janet's brief accounts of her husband's health that he was a cripple. He advanced towards the fireplace and

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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said in a cheery voice as he removed his hat, and in the sprightly tone the healthy so often use to the sick:

"Well, my good fellow, and how are you?" He extended his hand with a smile which combined the patronage of the gentry with the professional sympathy of the cleric. Steve shook it heartily and said curtly:

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Trownson. I've long been wantin' for to see ye, for I shouldn't be surprised but what you could help me out of a bit of a puzzle I'm bothering my head with most all my time."

"Yes, yes; just so!" said the friendly parson, separating the tails of his long coat as he glanced hastily at the wooden chair near him and seated himself on it. "Certainly, certainly. Are you in any spiritual difficulty, my good fellow?"

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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He coughed, bit his under lip with a slight smile on his face, and folded his arms in a resigned manner. He was so accustomed to the commonplace travailings of these simple souls, who wanted points of doctrine settled for them, in the same decisive way as their doctor's nostrums were handed over and bolted. He felt he could have closed his eyes and mumbled out the very words this simple miner would say. He was kind-hearted and felt for fisher-folk as he felt for his dogs or his horses when he was obliged to deprive them of liberty or to punish them. He tilted back his chair and crossed one leg over the other as he looked complacently at Trenoweth, with the smile growing in his eyes as he waited for him to speak. He almost lost his balance and fell from his seat when, instead of the

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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usual commonplace query regarding heaven or hell, Trenoweth asked him in a stolid, slow way:

"Have ye ever had a wife, sir?"

"What, in heaven's name," he said to himself, "is the blundering idiot driving at? Is he mad or bad or only curious?" His face paled and a nervous little laugh rippled away the merriment from his eyes and mouth. What had the fellow heard? What could be his object in cornering him suddenly in this way? He glanced quickly at him, and then dropped his eyes.

"My good fellow, what do you mean?" he asked sharply and quickly.

"Have you ever had a woman, sir?" repeated Steve stolidly.

Parson Trownson was puzzled. He objected to telling lies except under very special conditions, con-

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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ditions which came rarely into his uneventful life. He must either tell Trenoweth a lie or run the risk of disclosing his past, from which he had escaped when he came to this quiet fishing village, to the ridicule or pity of these people, whom he looked upon as mere children who could not be trusted with the sorrows of the educated, any more than boys or girls in an infant school. His perplexity increased as Steve's eyes travelled over his well-tailored person and finally rested full on his face.

"I should not ask ye, sir, for pastime or foolishness, but if you's had no dealings with a woman you can't help me nohow as I can see, for what I'm bothering over isn't put anywhere in the Bible, nor yet preached on in the pulpits—leastways not in my hearing of the Word. Forni-



## STEVE'S WOMAN

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cation and adultery"—the vicar stared blankly at Trenoweth—"and suchlike things is dealt with here and there in the Bible, sure enough, but there's a sight o' things, seems to me, begging of your pardin, of course, sir," with an apologetic jerk of his head towards Mr. Trownson, "that do fairly maze we unlearned folks, that ain't dealt with neither in the Book or in the churches or chapels. It's a parcil of trouble trying to ferret out the Almighty's will in some things when there's no chart nor pilot to guide you over a difficult line. Don't you think so, sir?"

Trenoweth's shrewd eyes sought Parson Trownson's face as if he would read his answer there. The parson coughed slightly and said:

"It is easy, my dear friend, to guide one's life in the path of duty

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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if we are determined not to place our inclinations in the face of the will of the Almighty."

"Yes, sir," answered Steve slowly, and he put his hands in his trousers' pockets and looked down at his feet as they hung loosely above the ground. "I do know that, sure enough; but what I'm wantin' to find out is what *is* the will of the Almighty. Is it the will of the Lord that us should go right agin nature and throttle a parcil of longings that God Hissself or the devil throwed in-to we? It's just that as I'm trying to find out: whether the strifings and pushings in us, that sends us on whether we like it or no, comes from on high or from down there, sir," pointing with his finger to the kitchen floor.

In all Parson Trownson's experience he had never before been con-

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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fronted with so direct a question. He was bewildered, and could have given a rapid assent to Trenoweth's next remark, which was also a question.

"Anyways—it's a puzzle whichever way you look at it, seems to me?"

In order to gain time the clergyman determined to question Trenoweth further and see if by any chance he could use stratagem in fighting the Lord's battle.

"I don't quite understand you, my good fellow," he answered. "Just put your difficulties before me quite frankly, and my advice is at your service. You see," he added with a smile, "there are many matters a little outside a clergyman's province, but, of course, I will do anything I can to help you." He crossed one leg over the other, nursed his right

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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knee with both hands clasped round it, showing, as he did so, the large signet ring on the little finger of his small right hand. Mechanically, Steve's eyes fell on the glittering object as he said nervously:

"Well, sir; look at my legs!"

Trownson glanced quickly at the thin crippled limbs of the man before him and said kindly and simply:

"I'm so sorry, my poor fellow; it must be a terrible trial for you."

"It ain't that, sir; it's this way," went on Steve, in a sharper voice: "I've a fine bouncing woman of my own; you do know her, I believe; how the devil is it the Lord's will for her to be fitted in with a maimed man as ain't no husband to she at all, and"—with a growl—"never can be no more?"

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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He hung his head, resenting in his heart that something within him forced him to tell a stranger his trouble.

Trownson at once became interested; and the man in him, which was not by any means drowned in the mere cleric, felt great sympathy for Trenoweth. He began to understand his drift, but all he said was:

"It's hard luck, Trenoweth."

"It's this way, sir," muttered Steve, sharply; "her do belong to love me right enough, but her's chafing cause her ain't got no child—that's the mischief with all women as is worth their salt, the longing to breed, and it's just rubbish to say as it can be stopped, 'cause my legs fails me; it can't, no more nor a half-moon can stop makin' herself a full one when her time comes."

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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Trenoweth shuffled restlessly in his chair, and tossed the hair back from his forehead as he went on:

"You see, sir, I do know a thing or two about both dogs and women folks; they're unlike and yet like in some things, but my woman ain't quite the general make of maids; her's a puzzler, I can tell ye, and 'twixt me and you I believe her's a bit of a riddle to herself. I tell ye what," and he lowered his voice, "I reckons that in this spring weather her do feel a want that's natural and right; do ye mind my meaning, sir?—and I'm fair befoolt over it, for in a manner of speaking I'm no more use to her in this job nor a stone."

He breathed heavily and the sweat stood on his forehead.

"There's no speaking of these things in the chapels, do ye under-

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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stand, and it's them things as I do want to hear on more nor about heaven just now."

He spat into the fire and cleared his throat. "I do worship that woman of mine, sir, sin or no sin, there it be! Yes, worship her, I tell you. The very sweat of her be a lot sweeter to me than the scent of the sea or the first flowers of the year, sure enough! I can't help it no ways! The very touch of her flesh is a bit of heaven to me; it's true, sir, if I have to go to hell for the idolatry as we're warned agin. I don't care a bit about what I've to lose over this breeding job, but I do care about her and what she suffers. She ain't happy; a natural fool can see that any day, and what do you think can be done for to help her, sir?"

"Absolutely nothing, my good

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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man, nothing," answered Parson Trownson, emphatically. "To speak quite frankly between you and me," and he glanced round the kitchen to assure himself that they were alone, "I think you've altogether exaggerated the situation." He waved his hand in the air as one accustomed to disperse doubts and lawlessness at a word. "It is probably because you spend so much time cooped up in the house." He drew his chair closer to Steve and said emphatically in a lowered voice:

"These matters are very delicate; in fact they scarcely bear talking over under any circumstance. In your case, my good friend," he looked quickly at Trenoweth, "the matter is exceptionally painful, but as a matter of fact there is absolutely nothing to be done. I can, however, console you thus far by assur-



## STEVE'S WOMAN

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ing you that women's natures are quite different from ours; indeed it is a kind of profanity to think it could be otherwise. The chief object of man's chivalrous care of woman lies in the fact that he feels this, and in his guardianship of her acknowledges her spiritual superiority to himself. A woman craves to have a child; quite so, quite so," with a condescending wave of the ringed hand. "It is a wonderful dispensation of Providence that your wife, whom I know to be an admirable woman, should have this wish—it is one of the most glorious designs of God, the desire to suckle children, but"—he coughed once more and a slight smile made his lips twitch—"but, my good man, you don't suppose for one moment that women have passions like ours, that they are radically lawless and savage or

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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even temperately animal, as men are, do you?"

"Yes, by God!" snorted Steve, triumphantly, "when a woman's suckling a child at her breast I believe her do like the feeling right enough, sir. I've seen women fit to bite the baby with joy over that job, like maids bite their sweethearts sometimes when they love 'em most." He snorted again and laughed fiercely. "I've never had no dealings with sprites nor yet with angels in my coorting jobs, I can tell ye. There's summat behind the beast in a woman, I reckon, as makes her such a powerful riddle to we men folks; but if it's the beast as you're scorning in men, I'm thinking you'd have to use the same birch to get that out of the women folks as well as out of we."

Trownson positively blushed, and

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thought to himself that, after all, the common people were moulded in totally different ways from the well-born. He simply put down Steve's statement as the summing up of a village rake, and the man became lowered in his eyes.

"Has your wife ever expressed any—ahem! dissatisfaction with her present life?" he queried with a touch of contempt in his well-bred voice.

Steve laughed brutally.

"What do ye take me for, sir? Do ye think as I should be telling you these fears of mine if her mouth-ed like a ninney to me? No! she bean't no blabber, I can tell ye; but I do see things ain't right, that's all, and there's summat working in me as I'm not learned enough to understand nor yet to deal with; that's all, and that's

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why I've spoke to you, because they tell me that college gents knows a power of things as we folks as works hard don't know nothing about."

"This is scarcely a matter to do with colleges, Mr. Trenoweth," the parson replied; "it really is a very simple affair if you will only look at it in the right light."

He lifted his left hand and forced back the thumb with the forefinger of his right, as if to jot off conveniently the several methods by which the world, the flesh, and the devil could be brought into complete subjection. He folded his arms together again after a moment's reflection and slightly raised his shoulders as he continued:

"You imagine your wife is restless, and your mind is a little overstrained with your physical trouble.

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Talk to her frankly; that is, as frankly as one can to a woman, and she will doubtless soon prove to you that your fears are groundless. A true woman finds her only happiness in her husband's welfare, and Mrs. Trenoweth is surely an exemplary character in this respect."

"You don't understand, sir. I must be forthright with ye, I can see. Janet, my woman, be no giddy spark of a jade, nor yet a bloodless fool, I can tell ye. She seems to have taken some of the beastly lustful devil out of me, and put some of her own breed in; it's her nature more nor my own as is working in me now, I reckon; it's like yeast moving in me, the wish to see her well and happy again as she do belong to be.' He beat the sides of his chair with the bowl of his pipe as if he were impatient. "I'm wondering, sir, wheth-

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er she oughtn't to have another man, one as 'd be a strong sweetheart to her and not a putty man like I be. What do you think?"

Trownson became very grave, and his lower lip hung loosely.

"Are you so unhappy as this, Trenoweth?" he said at last, changing his tone to one of almost equality. "Is that your only remedy? Do you seriously meditate allowing your wife to proceed to such lengths as that? No womanly woman could do it—no! no! no!" with a shrill tone in his voice and a glitter in his eyes; "it is only women who have forgotten God and duty who do such things. I thought Mrs. Trenoweth understood the eternal sanctity of the marriage bond better than that."

Trenoweth laughed.

"We ain't married, don't you see,

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sir? Not no more, in a manner of speaking, than if I was a corpse."

"Ahem!" coughed the bewildered parson—"don't you see, my good man, that marriage is a divine ordinance? It is not a mere animal relationship, a mere dog and bitch partnership." He looked askance at Trenoweth, thinking his analogy a little too strong for the occasion. "It is a communion of souls, a twining together of subtler needs than can be expressed; a union not only for time but for all eternity. To profane this is to risk eternal punishment; not, of course, in the ordinary hell-fire sense," with a smile, "but the punishment which comes to all those who break great spiritual or moral laws. If your wife violates your union for a mere physical whim, she dishonours not only you, her husband, but all womanhood, by

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the unchaste desires to which she falls a prey."

Trenoweth had begun to smoke.

"Seems to me, sir, begging your pardin of course, as you think a damned lot of the dog part of the business, after all. If my woman lived with another man as she could love in that way, and he her, there's no call as I can see for her to hate me nor yet to throw me on one side like a worn-out sack. Seems to me as if she could do that she'd have got pretty well rid of all them grand spiritual feelings as you seems to set such store by. It all sounds so fine, and all that, the way as you puts it, sir, but I can't help reading of it all backwards someway. I'll give ye the straight tip. I ain't no husband to her; that's sure; the question I want for you to answer for me is, am I to tie she for the



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rest of her natural life to my useless legs same as women folks is said to tie childer to their apron strings? Now speak straight and fair, sir, as man to man; do you think it's in the natural way of things that she'll go on loving me if I do? I think of it all till I'm scared lest she'll long for heaven just to get free a bit to pick up with a different make of chap, and then, what the devil 'll be the good of all this holding of her in?"

He smoked fiercely, and sent grey rings chasing one another into the ceiling. He watched them for a moment, and went on without taking his eyes from his pipe.

"You may whistle to love, seems to me, and hoot to her too, till you're black in the face, and done in the lungs, but she's a wayward minx, that she be; she'll come if

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she wants, and she'll go if she wants, and neither parsons nor yet lawyers, so it seems to me, can't put no salt on her tail, with all their fine talk and bragging. It's my opinion as there's a lot of trash talked over these things by they folks who'se never had their heart-strings tugged."

Steve spat impatiently on the floor and sighed. He went on slowly, as no answer came from the bewildered cleric.

"It's that sort of lesson a feller learns when he grows to love a woman better nor hisself, and I'm fast coming to think as books can't tell you much about it. I've thought over a sight of things settin' here, sir," and he pointed to the bench near him as he rested his elbow on the arm of his chair. "There's something in my woman's flesh as not

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only crazes the man in me, sir, but gives me a power of new insight altogether. It's the dog in me, as you spoke on just now, would kennel her for my own uses; I often feel as if I could snatch her and tear her in bits, in a manner of speaking, like a wolf rends a man, but there's something new got hold of me lately; I guess it's the man and not the dog, sir, and it's made me think of things more."

He went on dreamily, as if talking to himself.

"If her heart and body turns to another chap, let her go to him and have it fair and square a'tween us, that's what I do say; but I'm befoolt o'er the job at times, and wonder if I mean rightly what I do say, and if I shouldn't be the first to whistle her back."

"My good man," interrupted

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Trownson, "you're talking simple balderdash, if you'll excuse my directness; there is no law, human or divine, which could countenance such an absurd solution of your difficulty. It is highflown and morbid to an almost insane degree. Do you seriously mean to imply that you have some idea of letting your wife—ahem!—live with another man while keeping up a semblance of a relationship with you?"

He pushed the air vigorously with both hands, as if to turn back into the Inferno such mad, bad ideas. He was interested in Trenoweth in spite of his erratic and what he considered dangerous views; but he was rapidly coming to the conclusion that the man was nearing the verge of insanity, and he made up his mind to give a hint to some responsible person to note the case,

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for fear of evil consequences coming to the young wife.

Trenoweth spoke with an effort.

"If you loved a woman, sir, loved her a good length beyond your own soul, and then you lost her, my meaning is, lost her in the way as she couldn't be your wife, would it make you hate her, sir?"

The parson merely coughed, and smiled faintly. Trenoweth continued in a stolid way:

"If, I say, straight and square, mind you, to my woman: Look you here, wench! If you do belong to care anyway for some chap and want him, take him, but let's have it square and high and dry above board and no shamming—it's the shamming I couldn't abide—is that ridiculous? Well! that's but my meaning, sir. If," he pointed a long thin finger at Trownson; "mind

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you, I say, if my woman should want a husband as well as a mate like me, I don't see, if ye looks at it fair and square, why the devil her shouldn't have him, and not only that, why should she be asked to leave me out because of it. Ain't no folks chums at all when they can't do the honeymoon business any more? Ain't none of them big folks as can go into court and get unwed never friends no more?"

"I should say assuredly not," sternly replied Mr. Trownson.

"Then, sir, begging of your pardon, there's summat wrong in the way the things is fixed up in the marriage laws down here, and I do fervently trust that up-along," pointing to the ceiling, "there'll be a new line of conduct over such things. Yer don't seem to see, sir, as Janet 'll always love me, and she could no

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more leave me out in the cold like a pauper without love to warm me than if I'd come right out of her body."

"I suppose you understand that what you are suggesting is an abomination, not only in the eyes of God, but in the eyes of all good men?"

"Abomination," stammered Trenoweth; "to love your woman better nor yourself—do you mean that?"

The parson waved his hand.

"That is begging the question; it is not loving a woman better than yourself, but simply opening the door to lustful desires and weak sentimentalities. If such preposterous actions were countenanced by law, what on earth do you think would become of the family—the foundation of our Nation's happiness and prosperity?"

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"We ain't got no family, sir; that's the touchy bit in it all, don't you see?"

"Yes, yes!" testily answered the cleric, "but laws are made for the many, and these courses of conduct that you suggest will assuredly undermine all family purity and domestic peace. Indeed! such ideas can only be the outcome of evil thoughts and lascivious desires."

"Then, sir," answered Trenoweth sharply, "all I can say is—I'm hanged if the wicked uns ain't got a tip or two from up atop that the big wigs knows naught about. Do you mean to say straight and fair to me, sir, that it's wrong to love a woman so that you could hand her over to a bit of joy that you ain't in, in a way of speaking, saving the living from the dead, so to speak, and rejoicing at the pairing you've set



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yourself to see through? Do ye belong to tell me as it's sin in her to go to a second man unless first of all she do hate the first?—that the only way for her to do over this job is to lie inside and out, both to me and to herself, 'cause she can't crush feelings as the Lord Hissself blesses, we're told, if only the parson, begging your pardin again, bosses the show? If you can say as I'm wrong to feel like this over the job—well, I'm sorry I comed to you for help, for, in a manner of speaking, I feel now almost as if love have taught me about as much, and likely more, nor the school and the Bible together seems to have taught you."

Trownson was about to answer Steve in an authoritative manner, as he was nettled at the change o' tone in this miner. In the begin-

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ning of the interview he had noticed the deferential manner of Steve towards his superior, and he resented as an insult the straight speaking and calm smoking of this lover and husband who dared to teach him as if he were a schoolboy. The argument would probably have ended in a storm of abuse on Steve's side, and of sharp satirical expostulations on Trownson's side; but before the parson could open his mouth to defend himself from Steve's last attack a noise made both the men turn their heads sharply towards the door. Janet had just lifted the latch, and she stood in the entrance, a little bewildered at seeing a visitor with her husband. She advanced towards Trownson, and half curt-sied,—a habit caught in her childish days, when, at village treats and Sunday school excursions in the North,

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the little ones had stood in great awe of the local clergyman. She greeted Trownson simply and stood near her husband. The cleric looked at her sharply, almost savagely, as he would have looked at Eve after conversing with poor Adam about the apple-stalk in his hand. When Parson Trownson preached on Sundays upon Womanhood, he felt himself kindled by a divine fervour; the vision which always came to him was of the pure unsullied virgin, the mother of little ones, the comforter and helpmate of man, the refiner of the world, the silent spiritual influence at work by the hearths of any nation calling itself righteous, chastening by her mystic power the baser and grosser side of humanity, and freeing it from its animal lusts and stupid gluttonies. His ideal of Woman carried him often be-

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yond himself, and he rose on tip-toe, perspiring with the effort of his own eloquence. But this view of woman which Trenoweth had presented to him, a view sordid and gross, this gave him a feeling of physical nausea as he looked at Janet. Woman personified in this man's wife, not only as a breeder, but as a conceiver, not as one who submits meekly and of necessity to the sacred work and pains of motherhood, but as one who craves and demands the lawless play of physical enjoyment! Bah! His spine began to creep at the vulgarity of Trenoweth's description and the rank materialism which his words had implied. He turned curiously and looked at Janet as she faced her husband to tell him where she had been. He noted her length of limb and her rounded bust, the swing of her hips as she moved

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Trenoweth higher and put his cushions closer to his back. He began to think he was the victim of some horrible suggestion, for he felt a strange magnetic attraction as he gazed at the woman before him.

Janet turned quickly from her husband, and her blue cotton skirt swung in a graceful curve, exposing her well-shaped ankle and foot. The vicar got up, looked hastily at his watch and extended his hand to Trenoweth, saying in a hurried voice:

“A little cooling draught at this time of the year would be very useful to you, my good fellow; try it; magnesia or——”

He stopped abruptly, smiled in a constrained way as he turned to Janet:

“Good-bye, Mrs. Trenoweth. Ah! I leave your husband in the best of hands; he is feverish—feverish and

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over-excited, and you will doubtless calm him." Janet raised her dark eyes and looked at Trownson gravely.

"Thank you kindly, sir," she said simply, and held out her hand. The vicar clasped it, and when he was in the street he mechanically put the hand she had held inside his clerical vest, then he hastily withdrew it, looked at it in a bewildered kind of way, and muttered:

"The deuce!"

As he put his latchkey in the door of his house he muttered stupidly:

"Got the text — anyway — next Sunday—eh?—yes—of course—Lust of the Flesh."



## CHAPTER VI







## CHAPTER VI

In a big hollow on Bos Kivven sandhills a man lay dreaming; the hot July sun, streaming in full noon-day force, had sent him to this retreat among the miniature flowers and coarse grasses which grew in the hollows made by the winter gales. He had shaped the sand at his back into an easy seat; his legs were raised and crossed, one hand was thrown behind his head, and his deep grey eyes were gazing vacantly but restfully out to sea. He was puffing contentedly from a briar-wood pipe, and now and then he looked at his watch, seated himself in an easier position and half dozed as the sun here and there

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caught him unawares in his shaded nook. He was a ship's mate, "off deck" in more ways than one, for he was lounging in a summer's mood, and feeling in his soul at the moment that to be pinned to a post was the one evil in the world, to be free and at ease the supreme blessing. Nancy Nanquitho was his nearest relation, and he had several times almost mechanically dropped down upon the bit of ground which held his own blood. He rented a room in the village, when he came at rare intervals, and as she asked him no questions he rarely vouchsafed any information about his life. He came and went, as his mood and circumstances allowed, and Widow Nanquitho gave him on coming a welcome, and on going her blessing—that was all. To-day he had slowly sauntered towards the sandhills

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after a dinner at the village inn, which was calculated to make a man drowse, smoke, and dream that all was surely well on land and sea. His sunburnt face was honest and virile; one forgot to ask if it were handsome; its strength and cheerfulness banished the query. Sea-salt and tobacco brought an air of vigour and repose at the same time to those who talked to him. Just now his pipe drew well, he had had his dinner, the sun shone, he could hear the sea rippling in on the sands, wooingly and slowly, as if it were too full of noonday content to hurry itself even to kiss the ground. He threw open his coat and let the soft winds play upon him, and he smiled happily, for he was waiting, without any feverish excitement apparently, for a woman. He looked at his watch again. She

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was late. He closed his eyes and languidly drew at his pipe; he knew she would come, and a soft light spread over his face as he thought of her. Women were all alike, he mused, all clinging and faithful and sometimes bores with it, too, or—he pulled his moustache at one corner with his under lip and bit it meditatively—shrewish hell-cats who made a man's home too hot for him to live in. Then he drowsily pulled at his pipe and reviewed his experiences; he gave slight chuckles as he recalled one or two of his youthful escapades. Women had ceased to torment him, for he had faced his own nature and its needs several years ago, and also had realised, so he imagined, the limitations of women. He had invariably found them easy to capture; he had, until now, felt little need for

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a permanent relationship with any of them; that, he knew well enough, was a perilous venture which might turn a life keel upwards in no time. He had thought at first that the woman for whom he was waiting would never belong to him, but it had come, suddenly but surely; she was his at last, and he lay back in the repose of security and waited. He was in love, he said to himself, more so he believed than ever before, the sun shone and all was ready; what more could mortal man desire to make him happy? Love and the hot day were evidently too much for him. At last he slept, the deep dreamless sleep which comes in the open air when nothing pinches or maims the brain and nerves. His pipe went out and lay in his outstretched hand, which was being rapidly investigated by ants and

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sand insects. His legs remained raised and crossed, and one hand lay idly behind his head. The mouth, half open, revealed the strong white teeth of a healthy man in his prime.

The woman for whom he waited stood by him and watched him—watched him with contracted mouth and heavy eyes. She had come to the old haunt; she was ten minutes late and he was asleep. Her eyes wandered over his body; the big chest rose and fell with his deep, regular breathing. The woman shivered and then sighed. Her large nostrils moved rapidly. His dark blue shirt was open at the throat, and the thick hair on his chest was moist with the summer's heat. The woman stood quite still as she watched the sleeper; he sighed in his sleep. She moved backwards and her face paled a little. She took off her large

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sun hat and threw it on the ground; the man started and their eyes met.

"Janet!"

He sprang up, threw down his pipe and folded his strong arms around her. She made no movement and he drew her face up to his with a quick jerk of his hand and kissed her passionately on the eyes and mouth.

"There!" he said, and sighed happily; "there! that's good! so! Now another, my sweetheart!" and his eyes shone with good-humoured passion.

She put her ringed hand on his open breast and pushed him back. He laughed and caught her closer to him in his lover's mood, for he knew that she was being coy with him, as is the way with women.

He glanced at her face and whispered:



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"My own girl! so you're here at last! How I've waited, you loiterer! Come! let's be happy now!"

"Don't!" she said in a thick slow way, and she pushed him back again. "Don't, I say!"

Still believing that it was a mere woman's trick to intensify his ardour, he smiled.

"What's the row, Janet? Has the new moon turned you fickle?" and he advanced towards her again.

"Don't," repeated Janet. "I've done what you said to me; I've not told the man!"

He laughed.

"Of course not, my sweet! It would be crazy!"

"I meant to," she went on, "when I went home that night, but he was strange and moithered, being by hisself, and I couldn't get it out."

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Her hand was lowered and she added in her deep sad voice:

"Somehow it all looked so different when I got near him; not—" hesitating and looking round at the sandhills and then out to sea—"not like here in the sun, and I was shamed, too shamed to think of it even."

He glanced at her quickly.

"What the devil do you mean, Janet?" he asked, testily.

"You know what happened," she said, slowly, as if the words were dragged out of her, "here, last week, you know what comed to us. I was mazed, I'm thinking, mazed with the sun and—and—" she stammered—"something as I can't make out now, comed over me. I'm thinking," and she looked at him with glassy eyes, "I'm thinking as I'm about hating you and myself too

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to-day. What am I to do? Eh? Tell me?"

The sentence ended in a sort of wail, and she raised her hand to her eyes, as if to shut out the sunlight.

Her lover began to think she was either ill or serious. He drew her gently down on the sand beside him, and she sank into the place he had made for her. He seized her hand and pressed it between both of his—her long strong hand which was unlike that of any other woman he had known.

"Janet!" he said tenderly, "be reasonable, dear! What's up? You're tired a bit, I see. I know you said some nonsense last week about telling your husband of our love affair, but you couldn't have been serious. I knew that right enough, and made you promise not to tell him till I

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saw you again, just to make your mind easy. My sweet old darling! It would be the maddest thing going to do that!" He whistled. "By heaven! there'd be ructions then and no mistake. He'll never be a pin the wiser, and it's not as if I really took you away from him, you know—and—and—it might be confoundedly bad for him and upset him just now, don't you think?"

"It's the lies," she said simply.

"What lies?" he asked.

"Lies! lies! it's all lies," she went on, wearily,—“nothing but lies!"

"Nonsense, Janet," a little impatiently—"you're like all women, dear, overstrung and all that. You don't think men tell their wives their love affairs, do you?" He laughed and half closed his eyes. "Not they, indeed! there'd be pret-

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ty scenes if they did, I can tell you. Then why should you tell him?"

"I hate lies," said Janet.

He smiled.

"My dear! it's too late now; we may have done wrong,—probably have; we may have done right—don't believe we've quite done that—but anyway it's done, that's certain"—he looked at her meaningly—"and the best thing now is for us both to hold our tongues. You particularly if you've any sense or nice feeling for that poor devil of a husband of yours."

He picked a sand thistle and rubbed off with his thick forefinger the grey and purple bloom on its leaves, as delicate as the bloom on the grape. It pricked him, and he flicked it with finger and thumb over the ridge of sand at his feet. She watched him wearily, and he went on:

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"Your husband would simply raise the roof off the house in a jealous man's tantrums, and what good would that do any of us? You can't help loving me,"—he smiled at her—"I could not for the life of me have helped loving you; here we were; in fact, here we are; the thing's in a nutshell and we've got to make the best of it. Let's shut up this parson's drivel. Don't spoil a lovely day with old woman's rot, for I've just hungered to get you close and fast in my arms again. Come!"

The words startled her. She looked round in terror, and her hands shook so much that she clasped them tightly behind her back.

"No!" she said huskily—"never no more—never!"

"Nonsense," he said, suddenly waking to the fact that he was

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losing her. "Don't you love me, Janet?"

She turned her beautiful eyes full on him and laughed in a stupid way.

"I don't know; I've never asked myself that."

"What!" he retorted. "Is your body nothing to you that you give it for play on a summer's day?"

He spoke bitterly. She flinched visibly, and he saw the anguish creeping all over her face, and making it grey.

"I don't know."

"Whew!" he whistled. "If I thought——"

He stopped, for he had caught a strange expression in her face as she looked at him. He put his hands in his pockets and looked on the ground.

"You've duped me, Janet," he went on emphatically; "you've——"

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She stopped him and said roughly:

"And what do you think I've done to yon man, then?"

He waived aside the question with a lover's impatience.

"Do you hear, Janet? You're a flirt! that's certain, if you mean what you said just now. You've given yourself for an hour like a—" he hesitated as he saw her eyes glitter—"well, like other women do, and then—you leave me"—his voice broke—"leave me without a decent word to pull up a fellow's faith in women again." He covered his face with his hands and the veins had risen like cords in his thick neck, and she pitied him.

"Forgive me," she said simply; "it's been all wrong, and I'm the worst, as you say."

He sprang towards her and put his arm round her as she lay in the



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sand; he blinded her with kisses. His breathing became quick and heavy and he muttered between his teeth:

"Damn it all! But you shan't go! There! Do you hear? You shan't go. I'll have you yet if I kill him for it; you shan't waste your beauty on that cripple; I'll strangle him first. You belong to me, Janet—yes, yes, now and for always."

He had her fast and she felt that her power over him was going; the old delirious spell was creeping over her; his strength and manhood were lulling her soul to sleep again, and a frenzy shook her. He leaned over her as if he would devour her; his lips pressed hers closely and feverishly, and she saw the animal rising in him beyond all control as their eyes were riveted together.

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"Don't!" she screamed.

But he burst out with an oath and swore he would have her. Her lips tightened and with a quick movement she freed her hands and with all her strength she pushed him from her, as she said in a voice which made his heart beat madly:

"Stand up! Thou't nothing but a coward."

Then slowly and with set teeth the words came hissing to him. "Listen! I hate thee, I say—hate thee!"

He was sobered and stood up ashamed of himself.

"Forgive me!" he said; "I was mad; but it was your face, Janet, and—and—your devilish coldness!"

"Is that how you do love me?"

She sighed wearily.

"Is that how men folks love? That sort? You'd kill him and hurt me and only fill yourself after all

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like a pig without a ring through its nose?"

"And what about you? Where's your love that you told me of last week?" he said more gently. "You've maddened me, that's all, and I'm a blundering idiot to frighten you. But, dearest, where's your love I felt so sure of before?"

She looked out towards the rippling waves as they crept in on the big yellow sands, but she said nothing, only sighed as she shrugged her shoulders.

"Speak, Janet," he said quickly; "out with it. Did you lie last week or are you lying now? Speak, girl."

She looked at him in a stupid way as she clasped the loose folds of her bodice with both hands; he noticed how her dress hung on her, and how aged she had become.

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"I'm shamed," she said. "It were all right last week. What we did seemed no uglier to me then than bathing in yon sea; but now," she shuddered, "I feel a big stain on me as I cannot flick off nowadays, and I'm fain to tell the only one as 'll likely forgive me."

The man was getting bored. Women, women, women, he thought, all the same the world over; ready enough to rake up hell-fire, and then fly screaming at the smoke and flame. He had foolishly imagined that Janet had "grit" enough in her to keep passion fresh and strong and free from morbid regrets and useless taunts. It was a great nuisance, for he really cared for her, and now these tantalising women's fooleries were going to interrupt their pleasure. He tried to pacify her.

"Look here, Janet, my girl! Just

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listen to me for a minute. You're like all good women—bless you for it—too nesh over these things. I assure you, dear, we've done no real wrong; it's only your rotten straight-laced land-rules over these things that's worrying you. It is, indeed. Just look at the thing fairly for a second. Steve's no more a husband to you than that log of wood." He pointed to a piece of old mast, lying on the beach, which had become partially buried in the drifting sand. "He's done for, and you know it. You surely don't want to spoil his last years by telling him what's come between us. Now, that's wrong, if you like, to try and disturb a poor devil of a cripple who's lopped off from women and life altogether before his time."

"Don't!" she said.

"The fact is, Janet, you know well

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enough the thing is done and can't be mended now, do what we will."

"It's all lies," she said.

"Nonsense! To hold your tongue isn't lying; we've got to shut our mouths over this, and that's all."

"You don't see," she said wearily.

"With your sort love means mostly that—that—" she stammered—"what you and me knows—but that ain't all to wenches, I'm thinking. Steve do belong to me like as if I'd weaned him and—it's all lies, I tell you," she ended abruptly.

He looked at her closely and bit his lip.

"What do you think will happen if you do tell him, Janet?" he asked, with the faintest trace of a sneer on his mouth.

"I don't know," she answered.

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"Well, I'll tell you. If he has a bit of a man left in him, he'll tip some thickset mate of his to come and tan my skin for me; if he's a mawk, it'll kill him."

"Then why," she wailed, "why did we do it?"

He coughed and pointed to two flies crawling on his hand, but she had not taken her eyes from his face. "Why did we do it?" she muttered.

The why was taken up by a big bee who buzzed the question in his ears and flew off at last with a whizzing sound of insect laughter.

"You don't love me, Janet," he said despondingly, as he looked into her sad eyes—"not a bit, dear; I've been a stupid fool to believe what you said."

She shivered.

"You came to me," he went on gently, resolved to try a different

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plan, "rubbed off some of my low ideas about love, and now"—he eyed her keenly—"you throw me off again to go back to bought women."

She stared at him blankly.

"What!" she said suddenly.

"You see," he continued, thinking he was influencing her, "men all take love or lust; we're made like that and it'll always be so whatever the goody-goody sort say."

He laid his big hairy hand across his open throat. "It's here, there, everywhere, you know, all over a man, and will out if he has to go to hell for it."

"What will"?

He laughed.

"Why, it," he said—"sex or what you like to call it; I don't know what women think about these things, but a man can't live unless he has



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women." He slipped both thumbs in the thick yellow folds of his belt and whistled. "Mind! it's a damned nuisance and often enough it's more fag than anything else, but it's there, and you women have the whole thing in your hands. You pitch us into lust one day and then stand bolt upright like saints the next and offer us milk and water instead of the first red love-wine."

She blushed—why, she could not quite tell, but her eyes fell and her hands shook a little.

"Yes," he said harshly; "men all take it one way or another; it can be bought like tobacco or rum; that's one sort; the other sort, I'm thinking, isn't much better, for I believe you pure women play the same game with different cards behind the screen."

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"I don't know what you mean by that," said Janet, simply.

"Oh! nothing! Only you good women are always so afraid and ticklish about little things. You can never go the whole length of love; you offer us sugar-sticks, and when a man opens his mouth to bite, you scream and hide the thing away for fear some other sinner should catch you, then—you see—" he laughed again—"you've made a poor devil's mouth water, and so he must drink somehow, and then he damns himself and some other woman in quick sticks."

She only dimly caught his meaning, but her face grew whiter and the large rings under her beautiful blue eyes darkened.

"Then I've done hurt to both of you!" she said.

"Well—that's about it," he an-

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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swered, thinking her pity and remorse might make her yield to him. "I wonder if you really love either of us?"

She sobbed. Great deep breaths shook her whole body. It was not the hysterical grief of an overwrought and somewhat shallow femininity, but the convulsive throes of a woman in extremity. The man watched her and pitied her. Poor souls, he muttered to himself; it was always like this! They irritate and attract at the same time. So yielding and soft and lovely in their utter abandonment to sentimentality of passion, and then—plunged into despair or weakness when their own actions begin to work out logically. He looked at her tenderly from head to heel and noted her singular grace and strength and a curious feeling crept over him,

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a feeling of longing to protect and to always live with this woman who had come so suddenly into his life. He began to think that perhaps there might be a new sort of happiness in always being near a woman who puzzled and charmed him with her fresh goodness, which did not smell of either parsons or books. He knelt down on the sand near her and folded his arms about her waist as she stood sobbing.

"Don't," she said gently, as she bent and unloosed his hands. He obeyed her at once and she sat down near him. He began to feel curiously afraid of her, and his voice sounded thick and unnatural as he spoke to her.

"Janet, Janet, listen to me! Come! try and cheer up a bit! Let's drop this confounded subject; tell me, just once, that you care for me, and

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I'll be satisfied and wait for you—yes, I will, my dear."

His face had grown paler.

"I will, indeed—until you feel you can come. I will, upon my soul, Janet, for I love you, as I have never loved anyone before."

He spoke the truth, and she believed him and smiled through her tears.

"Thank you for that," she said.

His eyes were grave and tender as one of her tears fell on his hand as he held both of hers, and his thick under-lip quivered.

"Hush! hush! Janet; you frighten me. I will not hurt you nor force you! I will wait! Wait for years! but—tell me, darling, just once—tell me you love me?"

She stammered out between her sobs:

"I don't know; I seem to know

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naught now, naught but that I must tell that man; the thought of that fairly eats into me—the thought that I've lied to him and him so straight and fair and good to me."

She lay back in the sand and her sobs came at longer intervals.

"You see," she said, "I knew naught about things, seemly, till last week; I've been a wife all these years and yet—" she stammered and blushed—"it seems now as I do understand more what God Himself kens over women. I can't put it in straight words even to myself, though I've moithered my brains all night over it."

The man watched her and longed to touch her; a sweeping rush of desire simply to kiss her hand took hold of him. For the moment that was all he wanted—just to take that long firm hand and hold it between

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his in an ecstasy of silence, but he never moved; something held him back, and he looked at her hot face and burning eyes.

"What else?" he said stupidly.

"We've longings like you," she started, and then sat and faced him—"yes, I'll say out for once what's crazing me—we're not cold and frightened like you do say; we're just as fierce, just as warm and"—with a gasp—"just as mad over the flesh of what we do love as you, and madder, too, for we can't rend ourselves from what we've kissed no-ways—no, not noways, and you men folks can."

"But you are going to leave me?" he said meaningly, as he bent over her.

"I don't know," she said—"I only know as I can never leave him—no not for no one, and not if God His-

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self told me it were right and fit as I should." She clasped her hands together and gazed out to sea.

"We comes to love the men as we does for as we grows to love the childer we has pains for. When I'm mending Steve's coat, and I comes on a rubbed place like as seems to be a bit of hisself, I feels something come over me as I believe is the same sort as men folks feel when they've got a wench all to theirselves—body and soul—for the first time. It's not fudge," she said, as she saw a smile in his eyes,—“I know it isn't, for I've seen it in other wenches when they're knitting or putting up their men's bagging in hay-ing time. Women lives on bits of things—men needs hunks of everything, but our bits taste as sweet to us as your hunks to you.”

He scarcely heard what she said;



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he was trying to understand what had come over him; he looked round on the miles of yellow sands and then out to sea. Not a soul was near. He was strong, she was only a woman—they were alone and she was absolutely in his power, and yet—he was amazed at the strangeness of the situation—he had not even the courage to take her hand and hold it for an instant close to his heart. He gazed at her in a stupid way, like a man in a dream, and asked:

“Did you speak, Janet?”

“I was only saying that when a woman has done for a man, fettled his house for him and tended him and got used to his voice and his ways, it don't really matter if he gets crippled like Steve; he's hers—she can't get free of that, and she can no more

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get loose from him than she can from her own flesh."

He gazed at her in bewilderment:

"But, Janet,"—he hesitated, and added nervously, "if you really feel like that, how can you—ahem—love two men?"

She blushed and faced him, and her deep voice vibrated as she answered quickly:

"I've taken a whole week to puzzle that out, and I'm no nearer seeing things. I reckon I'll never find out why what were sweet and good to me a week ago is foul and bad to me now. I know naught, I tell thee—naught but one thing, I must tell the man, and this very night."

"Then it's all up," he said stupidly; "that's checkmate right enough. I've lost you!"

"I don't rightly know; that's as you reckon things. I can't abide

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lies, and it is lies for a woman to cheat her man. If I was a man I would stand anything but that—that and wheedling, which is something like cheating and lying in one.”

“Poor devil!” he said. “It’ll finish him.”

“You don’t know the likes of Steve,” she answered sharply. “I’m shamed to go and tell him—shamed,” and her face contracted, “but it ’d finish me if I went on acting to him as I’m doing now. I must bide by his will, and if he shoves me out I can’t help it, but I reckon he’ll perhaps sum up the thing straighter than I can, or you either.”

“It’s a confounded business,” he muttered.

“Nothing matters like lies,” she said.

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"Not even love," he answered bitterly.

She stood up, and put her hand on his shoulder; her tight grip sent his blood hotly through his veins; what would happen next? He did not care; a thrill of joy went over him as she touched him, and he did not attempt to move.

"Listen!" he heard her say. "I don't know much about what goes on out yonder, in the big cities where you say women sells their bodies for naught but common brass, but I can tell you this:" her eyes sought his and then suddenly dropped and her hand slipped from his shoulder—"if I hadn't felt a feeling to you as seemed to come fresh and sweet from God Hissself, I couldn't have let you come nigh me—no, nor him neither"—pointing inland. "I want you to mind that for his

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sake; it's his wife and not his wanton as you've kissed. Mind that always, and some day"—she laughed softly—"I'd be rare and glad to see you two grip each other's hands. Yes; I don't see why not, for you meant no wrong to me, and he'll ken that fast enough, I'm thinking."

The man looked at her and smiled.

"And what about you, Janet; what do you think he'll say of that?"

She crimsoned painfully, and her voice shook as she answered him:

"I'll be fair and tell him everything—how it came like a great wind over me—how I forgot even him for it—how—how—" she put out her hands towards him—"how something carried me away—away—something as I've never even felt for him—something as strong and awful as death itself—which cast me down and made me forget the man as I love best in

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all the world. Do you think he'll not believe me? I reckon he'll perhaps give me the only comfort I can get now, for he do love me and—and—he'll believe in me in spite of everything."

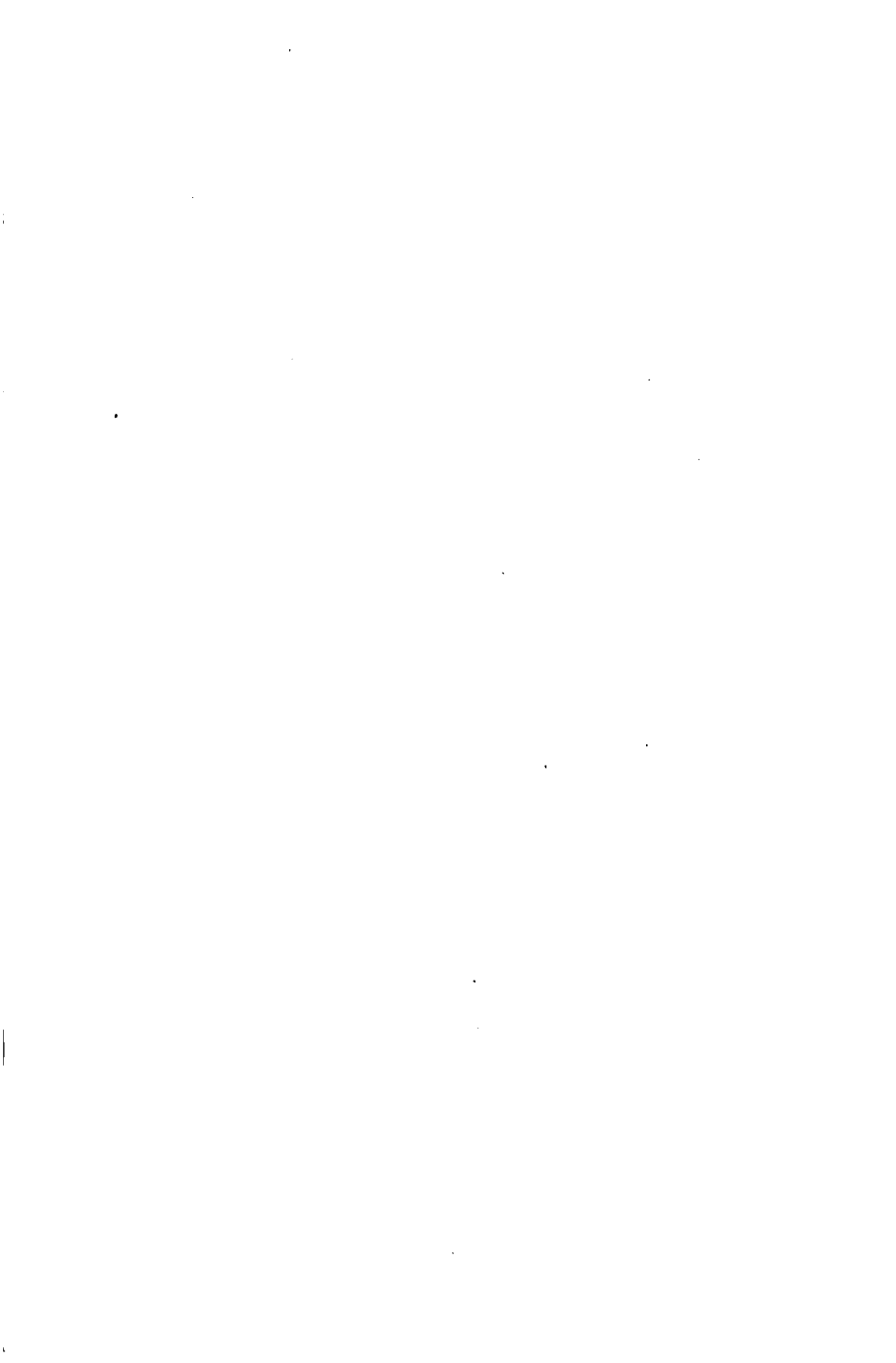
"You're a hopeful woman, Janet, and I'm a damned fool to have ever tempted you. No, I shall never see Steve Trenoweth; women don't know men, my dear, when they can talk like you. You'll learn a little more by and by. Don't you see that if we met, if he didn't shie the poker at me, I should have to——" He stopped abruptly, as he saw he was paining her. "No, no Janet; you can never understand; men are wolves when they really love a woman, and wolves don't share their choicest morsels except in fairy tales."

She turned to go, and he made no

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attempt to stop her. He had grown suddenly very tired; his limbs ached as if with fever, and noises came in his ears and head. He tried to speak, but no sound would come; he willed himself to walk towards Janet and take her in his arms, but he felt the sensation of nightmare; his legs refused to move, and he saw as in a dream the face and figure of the woman who was leaving him. She touched his hands, and he thought he heard her say quite close to him in her Lancashire brogue, "Bless you," but he was not sure. He was sure of nothing except that he must be going mad, for the sea seemed to have suddenly crept into the sky, and he distinctly saw the wavelets over his head and heard the dash of the water above him. This could only be the beginning of some horrible delusion,







**HE SHADED HIS FACE WITH HIS HANDS, AND GAZED  
ACROSS THE SANDS**

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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and he made a tremendous effort to shake himself into his usual self-possession. He moved at last and leaned over the brink of the sandhill where they had both lain. He shaded his face with his hands and gazed across the yellow sands toward the black rocks in the distance. A groan burst from him as he sprang to his feet, for he had traced her as she rounded the cliff. Only one idea seemed to possess him as he looked at her in the distance—the longing that she would turn and wave her hands to him to give him hope to wait for her. She had turned towards him and was looking upwards. The setting sun had wrapped her in colour; he stretched out his hands towards her and waited for a sign, but she turned and went slowly behind the black ledge of rocks. The man shivered as with

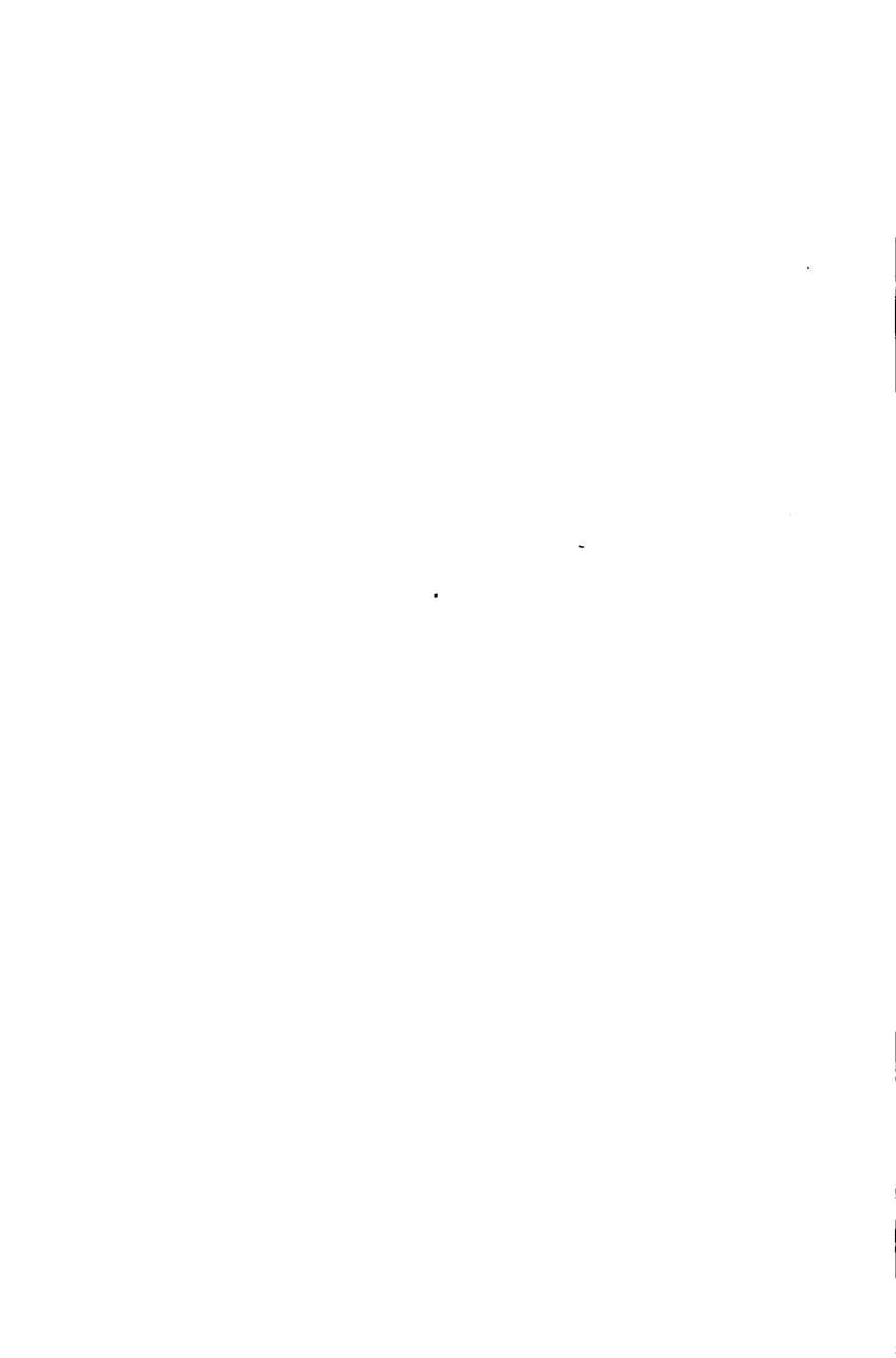
## STEVE'S WOMAN

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cold and cursed the fates, for he suddenly realised that she could not have seen him, since a heavy, dank Cornish mist had spread over the sandhills and covered from the eyes of the woman who stood in the glow of the sunset the figure of the man who watched from the hills.

## CHAPTER VII





## CHAPTER VII

“Darn ye then!” said Nan Curtis, as she opened her door in answer to a loud peal at the bell which made her jump quickly to her feet and leave the cleaning of her slab. “Oh! my dear! be it you? Darn ye, woman! do ye want to scatter the house on my ears with breaking the bell pull?”

She looked at Loveday and snorted, smiling reproof and welcome at her. “Come in, do,” she went on, “and sit ye down. Why! you’re all of a tremble, woman! What be wrong?”

Loveday’s fat face was bathed in perspiration, and her eyes seemed rounder than ever. She pulled Nan

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into the kitchen, and stood facing her with arms akimbo and legs apart.

"Woman!" she gasped. "I've tumbled on the secret of them weeds at last. Guess? No! ye'll never reckon it up. Oh! my blessed life! It's worse nor awful the slyness of the minx!"

She stopped for breath, and Nan, who had seated herself on the horse-hair sofa opposite Loveday, folded her arms and opened her mouth wide, showing the yellow tusk which seemed ready to devour gossip and scandal wholesale.

"What the devil do you mean, woman!" she snapped at last. "Don't stand there gaping at a body, but out with it. Is it something gone wrong with Clibby Steve's woman?"

Loveday smiled knowingly, and

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pursed up one eye in a suggestive wink.

"Why! the whole place 'll know the truth afore nightfall. Mincing jade! with her fine face and up-along airs; she's been seen over Bos Kivven way with a chap as don't belong hereabouts at all, and"—with a gasp—"them weeds is, what I've reckoned all along, nothing but pap to stop up Steve's mouth with, and she's played the fool with all of we, sure enough!"

She stopped a moment to pick her teeth with a large brass pin she took from the bosom of her dress, and then laughed loudly.

"Oh! my Lord! I'm as glad as if anybody 'd given me a maying, to have found her out. Proud up-start! as always seemed too good and fine to have a man lay a finger on her!"



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She folded her arms and leaned heavily on one leg as she continued:

"But mind you, mate," and she stared fixedly at Nan, "I'm sorry for Steve, for it's a bad job for him, sure enough!"

"It's blasted lies, I'm thinking," said Nan, emphatically. "I don't belong to hearken nor yet to credit all as I sees, much less hears! Anyways, I'm none going to believe that of Janet, or I should think as eyes was given to some folks for the very purpose of taking in their own flesh and blood. Janet be no wanton, I'll be bound, and if she's walked with a man—well—let me tell ye, Loveday, my dear, that none of us can throw mud at her for that, for I believe, if my winders don't lie, as you've walked with three chaps up-along and down-along this very week."

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"Walked!" grunted Loveday, who was not very pleased that her full-flavoured piece of news should be disparaged in this way; "as likely as not I've walked with chaps, but none of ye have seed me lying with a man—now!"

She delivered this speech with full force, and waited triumphantly for the effect on Nan.

"Darn ye! what be you trying to do now, Loveday? Flinging a woman's name in the mud because your own petticoats is none so clean! I'm shamed for you. A bit of dirty or measly talk over neighbours is right enough; it do make the day go by a bit quicker and sends a body to bed with a chuckle, and that often enough brings you to sleep, if you be a bit waken; but there's a broad difference, let me tell ye, between a bit of pastime and a lump of malice

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and envy. Yes! I do mean what I say," as she saw Loveday drop into a chair with her lower lip pouting in anger. "Yes! A lot of talk over that woman be nothing in the world but blooming spite. I likes her for herself, for there was no talk of looks when I were made, and I do belong to seek beauty outside my own mirror. I'd believe flash things of she, but never what you do say, though you swore it on your family Bible."

"Humph!" sneered Loveday, nettled by this new attitude in her friend. "If you be for upholding them sort of things it's getting time as you and me should be seeing less of one another. I always was one as stood up for a married woman cleaving to her man, even if he's nothing but a bundle of chaff, in a manner of speaking, as Steve be; and it do turn my liver and stomach sour to think

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of that mincing jade kissing strange men and meeting of 'em agin and agin unbeknown to honest folks."

Nan was alarmed, for she began to fear that Loveday had some reason for her venom.

"Out with it, woman! Who's seen what, and which devil have been so close to thy earhole as to fill it with this foul talk?"

Loveday grinned.

"Did you see me with Snowball Jack up street a while since?"

"No!" snapped Nan; "were you walking with a man then?"

Loveday laughed coarsely.

"Yes, woman, I were, sure enough, but I weren't lying in the sand with him and kissing of him, and that's what Janet were seen doing of early this afternoon, and him as seen her said as how he'd take his oath afore God and a whole bench of jurymen

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as it were none other but Janet herself. What do you think of her now—eh?" with a triumphant smile.

Nan stood taut and square, and her short skirts seemed to bristle out from her small stiff body, as if in protest against their owner being snared by a trap of any kind. She cleared her throat and spat in the ash pan, and then dug her knuckles in a friendly way into Loveday's arm.

"I tell you what I do think," she said; "I think that Snowball Jack, if it's him as has seed all this moonshine, must be a darned fool; for when Janet do go up-along for them weeds, she's well beyond the reach of the eyeholes of men as bides along of us." Loveday smiled and blew her nose on the corner of her dirty apron:

"No; she's got within hail for once't. Snowball Jack were sent up-

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along last night to Bos Kivven Cliff to watch for the mackerel boats and to help unload, for there's shoals of fish looked for thereabouts, and he were coasting till three o'clock and no boats had been sighted, so he comed home to once't, and I just met him with his mouth hot to bursting with what he'd spied up-along."

"He's mistook some coorting pair for her, I'll be bound. Snowball Jack, seems to me, is the onlikeliest man as should spy over them things; he do know how to coort, sure enough, without prying over cliffs to get new lights on that job."

Loveday laughed and smirked as she rolled the corner of her apron between her fat fingers.

"What's done in wedlock and what's done out, seems to me, is two different things. It can't be reckon-

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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ed harm to kiss and cuddle beforehand, just to get your hand in for a long job by and by, but when you're fully wed, seems to me, it's worse nor devil's work to chop and change one man with another."

"Darn ye, woman!" snorted Nan' who was now putting the finishing touches to her slab; "go to thy home and do some chars and forget the lies as thee's heard, for I'm certain sure they're lies and that Steve's Janet would do yet to plead for both of us over kissing, even before the Throne at the Judgment time."

Loveday stared at Nan in a bewildered sort of way and sighed.

"Well! it's the first time as a neighbour have told me to go out of her house, and all 'cause of a woman as weren't never fitty and should never have come among us honest

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folks at all. Yes! I'll holler as loud as I've a mind to;" as Nan put her fingers in her ears to drown the angry tones which Loveday's high-pitched voice had taken. "I were born hollering, and when I do want a mate to understand me I hollers louder than be natural to me. I'm fair befoolt over this job, and I should'nt have thought as my own companion, as I've knowed for years, 'd take sides with a loose female agin me."

She sniffled and applied the apron corner to her eye. Nan rubbed away at her stove and said nothing for some time; then she suddenly turned round, faced Loveday and yapped. Loveday peeped from behind her apron and sniffled louder than ever. Nan went to a cupboard near the stove and brought out a ginger beer bottle containing some colourless



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fluid. Loveday sobbed piteously from behind the apron, and Nan yapped fiercely as she undid the cork.

"Here, woman! I canna abide to see a female weep; it do always give me the crawls," and she shivered as she spoke.

"Dry thy eyes, mate, and have a pennoth. I do keep it handy for buryings and sudden qualms. I didn't mean any hurt to you, my dear, not at all, sure enough, but I'm thinking lately when I do sit here knitting a bit as it's women theirselves as strips women of chances every bit as close as men do belong to do. Something as a artist chap said to me back along have made me hutch up closer to females than I belong to do; none of us be so mighty decent as we need be flinging muck at otherfolk!"

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"Gosh!" exclaimed Loveday. "Seems to me you must be getting not exactly, Nan, for you've always been one as 'd uphold the tie between husbands and wives, and it's not that neither; it's the blooming cheating of the jade, with her innocent rose-pink face and her grainy way, as always gives you the notion as she be mixed with different stuff to us." She spat on the floor. "I do hate her; she's never once't spoke a seemly word to me since she comed to the place, and Clibby Steve's house ain't never been half the house for a gossip since he brought the maid home. I can reckon the day when the old un had it all her own way, and then it were something like."

Loveday's eyes were dry now, and she folded her arms and put her head sentimentally on one side. "Oh!

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my blessed life! What times they was to be sure! I've had many a tasty bit and many a long mag with the old un afore Janet comed and made all so different like."

"Drat ye!" said Nan shortly, "drink this, and don't be sparey with the bottle, woman; you're welcome you do know, and it'll happen make you feel less down, I'm thinking."

Loveday's eyes gleamed, and she took the bottle and poured out a small quantity of the fluid without adding any water to it. She smacked her lips and looked fondly at Nan.

"My handsome! it's just splendid. I could always feel chirpy if I'd be sure of getting a drop of that once't or twice in the week. It sends your blood dancing and singing someway and warms the very cockles of your heart. Just a leetle sup more, my dear."

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Nan poured out another generous helping, and then raised the bottle to the light, grunted audibly, and put it back in its place in the cupboard. When she turned, Loveday had drunk the second dose and was standing up ready to go.

"Thank you, my dear." Her fat hands were spread over her "lower stomach," as she called the most prominent part of her person. "It's a lovely feeling I've got over me, like nothing else as I do know, except," with a grin, "being converted. My gosh! that is a lively thing anyway. You do know I've gone through with it once't or twice, my dear, and it give me a feeling just like I have now, a sort of soothing restful kind of feeling as took out all the snarls and crusty thoughts as I had agin everybody. Have you ever been converted, mate?"

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Nan showed her large yellow tusks and yapped.

"Yes, woman, but it ended in coortship sure enough, and afore the blooming feeling had passed off I were being captained upstairs and down till I were crazy. I should never have been wedded, I'm thinking, if I'd never have been converted, and I've fought shy of the chapels since, for I paid for that bit o' holiday feeling for six year, and I'm none going to put my head in the noose no more."

"I commend ye," said Loveday, slowly, and then looking at Nan in a fixed way, she said suddenly:

"Woman! that stuff as you've give me is doing me a power of good. I've been nearly throwing myself over the cliff this last week or two. I'm most mazed with thinking about things, Nan." She laughed stupid-

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ly and sidled up to her friend and jerked her in the ribs. "I've been going a bit too far with Snowball Jack, and—and—" she laughed again—"do you reckon there's much good in taking green tea for to get clear again? I've drunk pints of it since last month, when I were sure."

Nan looked at her.

"Thee be a darned fool, woman!"

Loveday smiled.

"Yes, I do know, but it can't be helped now; he give me some stuff or another to drink, my dear, and it were a cold damping sort of day, and I took it to keep the creeps off of me, and—" she sniggered, "well, woman, you do know, but I'm fearing it's going to be a pest this time. What shall I do?"

"Do!" snapped Nan; "go down on your marrow bones and bide your

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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time and don't you slime another woman with foul names."

Loveday whimpered.

"You said just now as how you reckoned women should hold by women, and so," with a hysterical sob, "and so—I told you, and all you can do for me seemly is to preach at me, and I'm that—that—wearied and down in the mouth till"—her sobs became louder—"till I'm not sure what I mayn't do yet!"

Nan went to the cupboard once more and sighed wearily as she again brought forward the ginger-beer bottle. She planted it on the table near Loveday, and said sharply:

"Finish it, woman!"

Loveday meekly obeyed, and wiped her heated face with one corner of her apron and blew her nose hastily with the other corner.

"You be the only friend as I have,

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my dear," she sobbed, "and I don't know what 'd become of me if you died or anything; I don't indeed!"

The gin was beginning to take effect. Her head lolled on one side, she sank into a big chair, rested her elbows on its arms and looked stupidly at Nan, who was now sitting taut and grave, with her eyes fixed upon Loveday, while her right hand clasped the empty bottle.

"Don't you stare at me like that, woman," whimpered Loveday. "I'm no worse nor any other up-along or down-along, and neither him nor me's been fooling any other body!" She raised her head. "I'd scorn to do what some do belong to do, play games with married men."

"Darn ye! husht!" interrupted Nan. "There's little picking and choosing in these jobs. It's like walnuts and red cabbage in vinegar;



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they're a different sort afore they get in the bottle, but when you comes to taste 'em afterwards they're much of a muchness."

She folded her small thin hands together and sighed. Then suddenly she sat down near Loveday and smoothed out her gown carefully over her knees.

"I've been thinking," she went on slowly, "since I've seen more of folks and things, that it's best to hold your jaw and watch a bit. No one, seems to me, can't rightly blame nor yet praise another body, for it's more nor likely ye'll praise the devil and smut the saint, for some of us have fleas' eyes for to ferret out the good and asses' ears for harking to the bad. The ways of men and women is far enough beyond the ken of common folks, and I sometimes reckon that love's a

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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frenzy as He that has made us can hardly count upon at all at times, and"—she suddenly remembered Loveday, for she had been talking to herself—"and—it be no manner of use for thee to poison thy blood with green tea; it's likely the will of God for you to bear the fruits of thy pleasuring, and, anyway, even if it's only a bit of sport the devil be having wi' thee, it will happen to teach thee not to grab the next bit of dirty pleasure as comes along to ye when thee be too drunk to reckon with it."

But Loveday was fast asleep, and her snoring made Nan smile.

"It's almost as loud as some folks singing," she said, as she went over and looked earnestly at her companion. She sighed, and opened the door softly and went into the "best parlour" to dust it. She rubbed the

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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mahogany framework of a high-backed chair with great vigour, and then stopped a moment to take breath. Her eyes lighted upon a portrait of a stern old man which held the place of honour in the room. It was her dead "captain," and she sighed once more, and as she rubbed the twisted legs of the chair on her bended knees, she muttered beneath her breath:

"Darn the blooming mag! it do grow like ferns in the lewth, and nobody, neither devil nor angel, can stop it. It be like a gale of wind; yer canna tell where it do rise from of a suddint like, but it do drown a body without showing of itself, or tear up the houseplace like magic. Ugh!"

She glanced out of her big windows towards the shore. Regardless of seasons, the sea on this summer night

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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was in one of its wildest moods. Great white breakers dashed round the black projecting rocks, and the wind hissed and whistled as if it were preparing itself for screaming like a crazy woman. Twilight was rapidly deepening into darkness. A draught which came from the loosely fastened sash of the window made Nan shudder; it seemed to pierce through every nook and crevice of the room, and intensified the roar and scream of the north-east wind, with its bass and treble groans and yells as of sorrow and pain. To Nan it brought strange memories. It was on such a night as this that the mates had brought in her "captain," drowned by the cold and cruel sea, and then she had realised how habit and tending had bound to her, and she had grieved for him and half forgotten his tyranny and cruelty.

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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A great gust swept round the house and seemed to shake it, and Nan tried to fasten the window more tightly. As she did this she saw a figure being swept along round the corner near her house. The woman's clothes were driven like sails before her, and she could hardly stand. Nan exclaimed as she watched her frantic attempts to steady herself:

"Good Lord! she'll be down; 'tain't fit for a dog to be out."

She suddenly realised who the woman was, and she opened the hall door quickly and peered into the street.

"Come!" she said sharply; "come, Mrs. Trenoweth; you'll be most killed with the wind, woman! Come in and I'll get you a cup of tea, for I should think this gale of wind has about blowed the brains out of you!"

Janet laughed softly.

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"I can't get my breath," she said. "I'm done out, I fancy. Yes, thank you, Nan, I'll rest a minute to get my wind a bit."

She followed Nan into the hall and leaned against the door as it was closed behind her. The elder woman turned and looked at her guest. Janet's beautiful brown hair was rumpled and tossed and her cheeks were red from the fight with the wind; her dark blue eyes, which were shaded by purple rings under them, had a wistful light which did not escape Nan's keen look of inquiry. She was gazing into Janet's face to find the trail of the fiend, for Loveday's story had perplexed her because of its unlikelihood. She stared at Janet, and then yapped, very gently for her, for fear of wakening Loveday. Janet laughed too.

"Oh!" she said with a gasp;

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"I've not come here of my own will, Nan, I've been swept here. I don't believe I could have stood on my feet a minute longer."

"Have you walked far?" asked Nan.

"Yes," answered Janet sharply, "I have—a good long way!"

"Seaweed?" queried Nan.

"No," said Janet.

Nan smiled. Then she folded her hands together in front of her small waist, and said suddenly and with a genial yap:

"Why the devil, woman, can't I call you Janet?"

Janet laughed heartily.

"Why haven't you before, Nan? I'd like it from you, and—and—from others too," she said slowly.

"Darn ye, woman," said Nan, "I wonder I've never thought on it afore, but it's just comed in my head

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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like a swear word," and she fumbled in her gown for her handkerchief and blew her nose loudly. Then she laughed again and said suddenly and rather nervously:

"Janet! I'd be very well pleased to have a kiss of you, my dear, if it do please you," and the yellow teeth snapped together as she looked into Janet's face.. "I fancy there be but few females hereabouts with your forthrightness in 'em, and I commend you and like you for it. Now!" standing taut before Janet and putting her hand on her arm. "There now, I've said what I've wanted to say to you before today; but a body do feel a bit soft like when they set to work telling of a woman as they do set store by her."

She snorted and sidled up to Janet and gave her a gentle poke in the ribs. The tears had suddenly sprung into



## STEVE'S WOMAN

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Janet's eyes; sympathy just then seemed to crush her. With one of those uncontrollable impulses which sweep over women sometimes as intuitions or as madresses, she fell on her knees at Nan's feet, clasped the woman's gown with her two long hands and bowed her head over them. Nan snorted like a wild creature and said thickly:

"Lord a mercy, my dear! get up to once't. Whatever be you a-kneeling like that to an old creature like me? I'll stand by you, Janet. Yes! I will. I'll keep to my word till I've passed, now!"

The wind screamed and whistled round the house until voices could scarcely be heard. As it died away in a moan the temporary lull seemed to rouse Janet. She rose, and Nan, on tip-toe, reached to her new friend's face. She took it between her hard

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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thin little hands and dwelt for a moment on its softness with the expression one sees in a beautiful woman's face as she looks in her mirror. Then she kissed the mouth again and again with the sharp quick kiss of one unaccustomed to tender love ways.

"There!" she said, "that's for always, mind. Folk may come and jaw, but they won't draw me over anything that you may tell me. I'll stand square to you whether I know or don't know all about ye."

Janet smiled wearily, but she said slowly and almost cheerfully:

"Thank you for that, Nan. It's a treat to know you mean what you say. I'm—I'm——"

A sudden noise made the two women turn.

Loveday stood in the doorway of the kitchen. Her right thumb was

## **S T E V E ' S   W O M A N**

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**in her mouth and her face was vacant  
with drunken wonder.**

**"My gosh!" she muttered.**

## CHAPTER VIII





## CHAPTER VIII

Old Mother Trenoweth was asleep. Finding her son silent and inclined to doze she had slipped from the kitchen into her little bedroom and had lain down with a weary sigh. The tempest without and her own desponding thoughts about Janet and Steve had brought on a mood which even the Big Book was powerless to dispel. She closed her eyes and gradually sank into unconsciousness. She awakened suddenly from a disturbing dream, in which she saw Steve's legs being sawn off with a blunt file, to find Loveday bending over her with her finger on her lips.

"Husht!" she said solemnly, as

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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she shook the old woman's arm. "I've crept in unbeknowns to Steve there," pointing to the inner room; "he be fast asleep and looks as snug as a duck." She laughed roughly. "Let him sleep, poor fool; it's the best thing as he can do, seems to me."

She sat on a chair near the bed and leaned over towards the old woman.

"Thy Steve have got to know a thing or two when he do waken, let me tell you. Seems to me as his woman 'd trample the life out of him, and never shed a tear over it."

Loveday scratched her head slowly and then jerked out as she pointed to the kitchen:

"She's been with a strange man for hours to-day, kissing of him and cuddling of him, and he sleeping in there like a lil baby; a innocent forth-right fool he be, who thinks no hurt

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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of she and 'd never believe the truth about her if God Hissself told him it."

The old woman sat up and twisted round to face Loveday. Her old thin legs hung loosely over the side of the bed, and her two hands were outstretched on either side of her as she leaned forward and peered into the eyes of her neighbour. She sat speechless with horror. For many months she had tried to overtake Janet in some fault; had watched and waited in the hope that her son's wife, through some frailty of nature or want of purpose, would be found to be made of as common clay as herself and her neighbours; and perhaps what had chafed her more than anything else was the fixed conviction in her mind that her quest would be a useless one. Her private conviction was the same her



## STEVE'S WOMAN

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son had expressed when he declared "there is no flaw in her." The thought that perhaps Loveday's words were true and there was not only flaw but sin in this fair saint, whom her son worshipped, almost paralysed her, and for his sake she now took up the cudgels for Janet.

"Thee art drunk," she said stolidly to Loveday, and her old hands tightened on the white counterpane.

Loveday laughed.

"Yes, so I be, sure enough, but with different stuff to a woman's face. I'm thinking as the whole place hereabouts be going crazy over Janet. Nan's brains, seems to me, have got soaked with her at last, and now you"—pointing with her fat finger at Mother Trenoweth—"why, you, as be her natural enemy, in a manner of speaking, be upholding of her. Why, woman, don't



"THEE ART DRUNK," SHE SAID STOLIDLY



## STEVE'S WOMAN

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you recollect how you have set me on Janet's tracks yourself, almost against my own nature, for to find out measley things of her? Well! I've found out enough about her to earn a Queen's pension, and you sit up like a image and make ugly faces at me because I've done the very thing as you was longing for me to do. Tain't neighbourly, to say nothing else about it."

She stooped and pulled up a loose stocking, and tied it over her knee with a bit of flannel edging which was frayed and black with age. Her face was red from the exertion when she again faced the old woman. Mrs. Trenoweth still sat in the same posture, except that one wrinkled hand fumbled into her pocket for her handkerchief. She carefully wiped the corners of her mouth and again clasped the quilt with the

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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handkerchief still in her hand. Love-day waited for her to speak, but her mouth was set and she uttered no sound.

"Don't ye bear no grudge agin her now, Mrs. Trenoweth?" asked Loveday sharply.

"Yes, yes! sure enough," she muttered; "but, my dear, if what you do say be true it 'll about kill Steve, and—and"—the old hands were now clasped together—"Oh! I'd sooner bear all the mincing ways of forty false females as was ever born nor hurt him! Oh! Lordy! Lordy! it's a judgment on us! it's a judgment, sure enough. What shall we do? What shall we do?"

She whimpered and buried her face in her hands.

"Gosh!" murmured Loveday; "here's a job! The muck's set rolling now and the old un's scared at

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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the sight of it. Pity but what we'd all of us held our jaws about her. It do never do to stir a dung pile if you've got a tender nose for stinks. Better let it rot and pretend it ain't about at all. But this pile have been stirred, sure enough, and we've got to stomach it the best way we can."

The old woman still whimpered, and Loveday's face grew graver and graver.

"I wish Nan was comed," she said under her breath, "for I'm none fit to tramp down misfortune. Look here," she said suddenly, "I'll shut up Snowball Jack's mug over this job at once't; now! though the news by now, I'm fearing, will be like the floods a bit since gone, whether we will or no, right into everybody's door. But cheer up; I'll do my best for you and Steve, Mrs. Trenoweth,

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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even if I have to turn a willing liar over it. After all, I believe it's a good bit the itch in me to be thought well of as have pushed me on over this job. I've a parcil of proud longings in me, and I'm pretty sure as they have spurred me on to hate Steve's woman. She could have given me a leg up if she'd had a mind to, but she's always treated me like dung, and," with a vicious stamp, "I do hate her for it, for if you prick her finger and mine, you'll find the same blood in both of us—now! I've always understood as you was agin her yourself, too, Mrs. Trenoweth, for many and many a time you and me have set one another on a heat of hate over her. There were a time when if she'd only spoken fair to me, likely as not I'd have gone as crazed over her as Nan be now, and I comed to know that as I walked

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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here, for I were struck by Nan's way as I left. She be like one under conviction about that woman, and I seed a sight afore I left her house as fairly caught my breath!"

The old woman stared appealingly at Loveday and touched her gently on the arm.

"Loveday, my dear," looking shrinkingly at the door, "tell me," in a whisper, "what have Janet done?"

"What we've all done once't or twice, I reckon," laughed Loveday,— "kissed the wrong man."

"It's witchcraft, sure enough," sighed the old woman.

"It's nature," snarled Loveday fiercely.

"Lordy! Lordy!" and big tears rolled down the old woman's cheeks, "to think that I should have lived to see my handsome befooled!"



## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"Why!" interrupted Loveday,—  
"you never thought, did you, but  
what Janet was a flash sort all along?  
Many and many's the time you've  
told me so, and now, because it's  
proved true, you seem most heart-  
broken over it."

"What shall we do? What shall  
we do?" whined the old woman.  
"Steve is bound to know afore long,  
and who'll tell him, I wonder? It  
'll kill him, it will, sure enough;  
dirty lying jade she be, and they as  
has spied on her be no better. I  
hope the Lord 'll punish her with  
many stripes and with bitter pains."

Loveday's face had suddenly  
grown bright, for an idea had crept  
into her dull brain.

"Look you here, Mrs. Trenoweth,"  
she said. "I'll git over this job  
for ye. Yes, I will. I'll tackle Janet  
my own self," with a laugh, "and

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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tell her straight and square what I do know. It'll happen then be my turn to mince a bit, I'm thinking, and her fat hands made a slender flail of her apron, with which she flicked her knees. "I'll have a forthright talk with her this very night," she added gaily, "if I can only happen on her for a while without Steve being by, and I'll mark her bearing over this job and then act as it do seem best afterwards. I'm in agreement with you, Mrs. Trenoweth, and I think as Steve should know about this to once't, but if she's very repentant," with a giggle, "we might spare him most of it, don't you see? Howsomever, I'll face the hussey and see if her rose-pink face do flush at all—eh?"

She poked the old woman on the knees with her knuckles and coughed significantly.

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"Lordy! Lordy!" whined the miserable old mother as she slipped from the bed and stood before Loveday; "are you certain sure it be true, or is it all a tale made up by malice and laziness?"

"It is true enough," answered Loveday. "Snowball Jack see'd it with his own eyes, and you'll likely enough have a brat to tend in this house-place one day for to witness to her virtue."

She laughed coarsely, and then said with a sudden impulse:

"But I'm getting sharp in the tongue agin, and, after all, she's no worse nor others hereabouts; all of us ain't no great shakes, be us?" with a quick look at the old dame; "but that's the queer thing in this job, as she's no better nor us," and a gentle smile crept over her face. "I do feel more kindlier to

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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her now, someway, than I did afore, and I reckon perhaps when I've had a forthright mag with her I'll likely feel more like Nan do feel towards her." Then with bitterness as her face clouded again: "No, I shan't neither, for maids and wives should have different ways with them; I'm certain sure of that; for what's nothing but a bit of a prank with one, is the devil's own work with the other."

A movement in the kitchen roused both the women.

"Wait!" said Loveday, "I'll go and move Steve, for it's he as have wakened, and is wanting of ye. It won't do for him to see you with that look on thy face; it's enough to frighten the craws, much less a man like Steve, as do belong to read to once't in a body's eyes what's going on in their insides. I'll say

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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you be coming by and by, and do you wash thy face and chirp up, woman. Leave it all to me, and I'll do for ye as I would for my own, now!"

She opened the door and went away, and the old woman fell on her knees by the bed, and, shaking her head from side to side, muttered:

"Blessed Lord and Saviour! have pity on us! Take this burden off of us, for it be none of our seeking. Have mercy, Lord, on a mother's broken heart—oh! be gracious —"

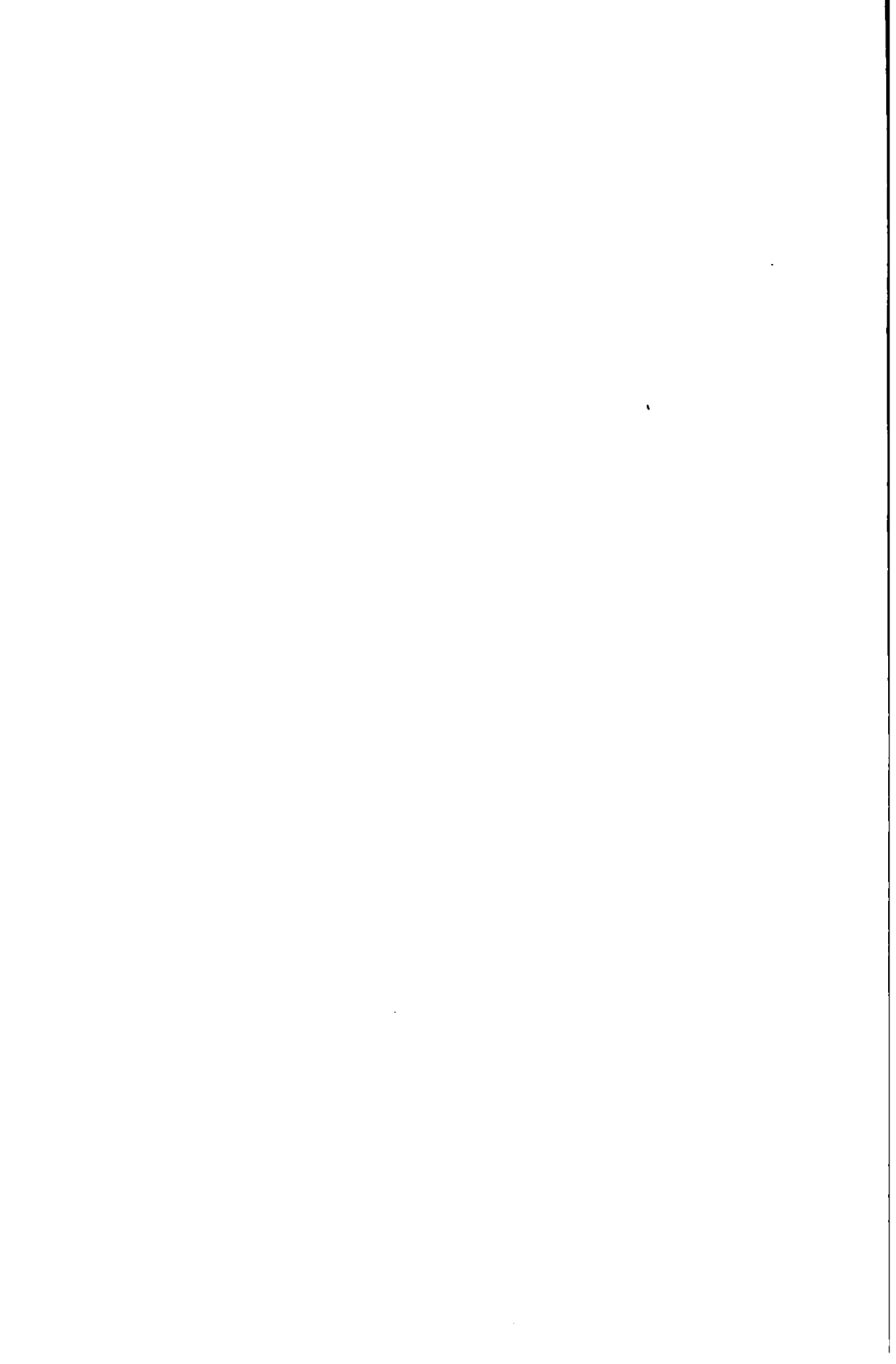
She was rudely interrupted by Loveday, who had come back and was shaking the old woman's arm fiercely as she knelt with her head bowed over her hands.

"Mrs. Trenoweth! Get up to once't; Janet's come, and I'm too late to jaw her; she's kneeling like

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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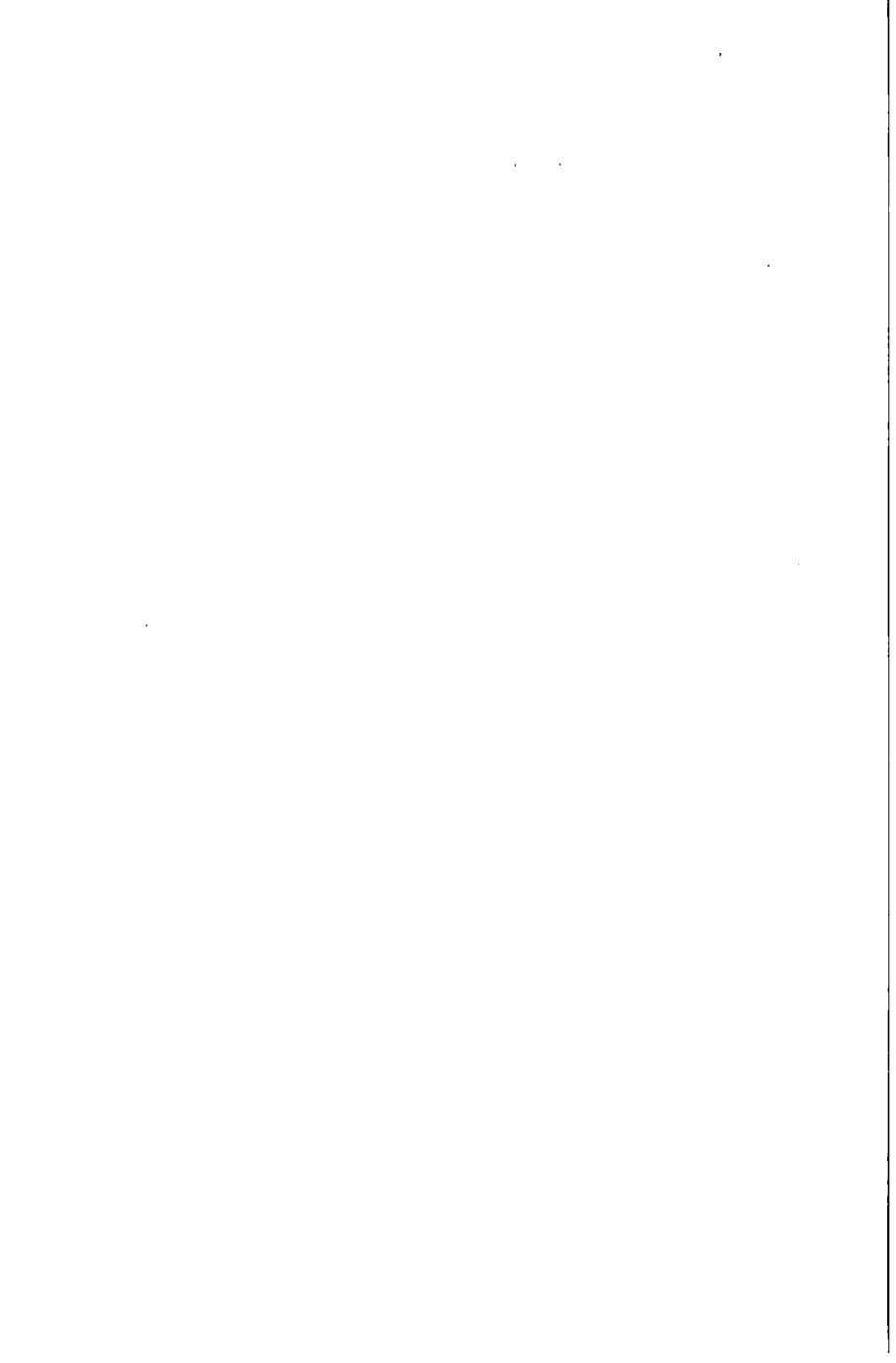
a innocent babe alongside Steve,  
and they be staring in one another's  
eyes like two fools just beginning  
courtship. My Lord! that woman  
beats a play actor for shamming!"



## CHAPTER IX







## CHAPTER IX

The wind of the previous night, with its ghoulish yells and mocking wails, had suddenly stilled. Nature for a brief hour seemed poised between smiles and tears, and then, as the dawn slowly crept over the shadowy hills and the black cliffs, she decided for shine and shimmer, and soon the little hamlet of Carnwyn was roused to greet one of those luscious days when light and colour transform everything. The sea was calm, and the little skiffs moved on its blue surface as if propelled by some mysterious sea-elves, whose gliding motions under the water gave it the sapphire tinge by which mortals become soothed as by fairy liltings.

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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Janet watched the sunrise from their little window.

Steve was asleep in her arms, and a smile played round his lips as he dreamed. Janet turned to look at him, and she smiled too as she drew him closer to her. The movement wakened him and their eyes met. She cradled him in her arms and he hungrily kissed her breast as she folded him to her.

"Janet," he whispered softly.

"Well, mon," she answered.

He held her chin between his finger and thumb and looked in her eyes; then he spoke slowly:

"I pity them chaps as uses ringlocks for to keep their wives from flying from 'em. Janet, thee's been near to the very heart and soul of me this night." He stroked her head tenderly as he went on. "It's fools and worse nor fools that holds

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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what they love past bearing. Look at that gull and don't go for to cry, girl—it's all like a bit of heaven, sure enough."

Janet sobbed softly, but did his bidding and looked out to sea, where she saw the upward sweep of a gull whose white wings gleamed in the sunlight. Steve laughed happily as he kissed his wife's hands.

"Hear her cry!" he said suddenly; "she's free, woman—free to go and free to come."

He gazed at her with passion in his eyes, but his mouth twitched with tenderness as he went on:

"I do worship thee, woman, with all my soul and all my body, and—and—" taking her face between his hands, "if thee would like that chap fetched—Yes!" with emphasis—"Yes, by God! he shall come and dwell with us, and I'll throttle any

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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bit of jealous devil left in me right away if it'll make thee happy again. It have come over me like a dream that jealousy be the meanest sin in the whole world, for it breeds what it's powerless to deal with." His face saddened: "To lose thee would be 'most death, I do know, but to hold thee against thy will would be hell for us both. It is borne in on me and must stand so. If——"

Janet stopped him as she pointed to the sunrise. Her voice was low as she almost whispered:

"That's like an answer to both our fears: it's something so calm and grand, and has nothing to do with men's little ways at all."

"Ay!" said Steve. "It's a scare we've both had; the gossips scared me, and the man as thought he loved thee, scared thee. We're together now, lass, with no one by to meddle

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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and mag. It's the magging that always rends things abroad and gives a couple no chance, whether it's in wedlock or out. It's we two and we two only as can know and understand one the other; and I feel young and happy again, because it is thee and thee only who can make up what I've been ferriting out in my blind way for months. We love one another, woman—love one another so well we ain't afraid of no one—not even of someone who tells thee I'm a wolf over thee. I am a wolf, sure enough, but thee's made me feel to-night a longing to give that other chap a handshake. He'll never want another make of woman again. Ah! lass, this night beats our marriage night to fits. We're married o'er again—more like they marry in heaven, I reckon. Once I thought it a dull job, as the parsons

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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give it to us; but, by God, I'm not sure we ain't all in a fog down here o'er the marriage show. Our notions are a bit too musty and fusty here for God's place, I'm thinking. I reckon the first lesson over there 'll be a bit like this one you and me be learning." He laughed and held Janet closely to him as he went on in a happy voice: "I'm like a child in the sun, woman—o'erjoyed at the thought that I'd grudge thee nothing in the world, nothing, mind—not even his child!"

He cleared his throat, and his chest rose and fell. With a sudden movement Janet turned and looked at him. Her face was bathed in light, for the sun had now risen and its slanting beams made the dust specks in the room roll and dance, as if to keep time with the glad twitting of the birds outside, who

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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were busy drilling their youngsters for flight.

"Lad," she said slowly, and her face was alight with wonderful rest and happiness—"lad, thee— thee and no other art all I want in this world. Yes—" as he shook his head; "it's truth! If for one mad hour I lusted for that man as I've telled thee on, with that hour it passed from me as if it had never been. He told me hisself as it were just that way as men folks feel like often about women—women, too, as they happen never clap eyes on again; just feelings as come and go like those of the beasts in the field." She shook her head slowly from side to side and took her husband's hand in her large firm one and kissed it tenderly as she hung over it. As she stroked it gently with her other hand, she went on in a low happy voice:



## STEVE'S WOMAN

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"Eh! But, lad! if thy fingers were took like thy legs and all thy body turned white like the lepers the Bible tells on, dost thee think now as thou wouldn't be the sweetest and gradliest lad to me in all the world?"

She fondled him and crooned over him, as she continued:

"For why! Because thee've understood as no one else could, as yon man never would in all the earth and as I can't even rightly myself, how it was as I were mazed with life and took the rope length as you gave me."

She laughed softly and closed his hairy hand between her own two brown ones:

"You may let the rope go! yes, lad, the whole length of it, and because you'll never tighten it nor yet knot it, I've a mind to stop. The queer part is I'm none repenting

## STEVE'S WOMAN

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as I ought to; for if I'd never gone from thee for that day I should never in all this world know what I know for sure now: that—that—" she hesitated a moment and then held him close to her breast—"that it is thee, and not him nor yet no other, as I do love as a woman loves a man."

THE END

